

WHY?

*The Why of our life is its meaning. **Just as gravity powers the rivers, meaning powers the flow of our lives.** For most nonhuman life-forms, the underlying substance of meaning converges to these two drives: survive and reproduce.*

Plants and animals go to great lengths to serve this meaning. They are obsessed with collecting and storing energy. In some instances, their devotion and sacrifice make anything we humans can do pale in comparison (more on this later). Many of these admirable behaviors, however, are instinctive and embodied by every member of their species. Animals don't have to think or duel with conflicting ideas to do what they do.

Procreation and child-rearing are instinctive for us humans also. When it comes to the children in our lives—our own kids and grandkids, friends' kids, nephews, nieces, neighborhood children—we want to protect them all. **Our children are like our own hearts beating outside our bodies.** It gives us great meaning to help raise them and protect them, often at the cost of our own comfort and well-being. Many parents I know, if they could, would willingly take their children's pain, illness, or misfortune on themselves. Our meaning, however, isn't limited to our instincts. Humans have two additional meanings.

Uniquely Human

Many of us are searching for something larger than ourselves. It could be serving the country, saving the bees, preventing global warming, or spreading the gospel. Poets, philosophers, and contemplatives have used flowery and inspirational words to describe this purpose for which we are willing to invest substantial time and money and even sacrifice our dear lives. At no time is this more evident than when soldiers march onto the battlefield, willing to die to protect their country. Parents have been known to willingly sacrifice their children's lives to protect something larger than themselves, an action that goes against their every instinct. This meaning is intentional and unique to us humans.

A second unique aspect of humanity is our ability to assign meaning to random events, particularly the unpleasant ones. Such meaning often relates to how the bad could have prevented something worse or created something good. An annoying person in your family could be the uniting force for everyone else. A forgotten job interview could have saved you from a potentially toxic work environment. A missed exit could be an accident avoided. Viral illnesses could be food allergies averted. **Finding**

the good in bad, the gains in losses, and the lessons in reversals can be extremely empowering.

A human life deprived of meaning drifts like driftwood, easily jostled by waves of unmet desires or adversity. Unfortunately, while most of us struggle with the question of the ultimate meaning of life, this question doesn't have an easy answer. Searching for it is a bit like looking through dense fog; you can't see clear to the horizon. Until we know what precedes and follows our earthly existence, we won't be able to convincingly and completely answer the question about what it means. **A better question with respect to the meaning of life is, what is the meaning of *my* life? How can I make my life more meaningful?** Those are answerable questions that provide a good intermediate meaning, which might suffice for most of us.

In general, the more thoughtful you are about living your life with meaning (serving the planet's children, thinking about something larger than yourself, finding positive meaning amid adversities), the more connected you feel with the world. **When you get busy helping the world, the world gets busy helping you. The only caveat is that it takes time for the world's actions to become visible.**

Most of what is meaningful in the world around us can be captured in four overlapping domains.

The Four Domains

Four domains capture the essence of our meaning: belonging, building, becoming, and believing.

Belonging (relationships). Emperor penguins are known for extreme devotion to their offspring, braving the cold and starvation for months. Octopus mothers go even further. After they lay eggs, these hardy little ladies spend the rest of their lives close to the eggs, protecting them and sending fresh water so they get enough oxygen. They never leave the brood, not even to feed. Just when the eggs hatch, with the job done, the mothers die—of starvation. Instinctive devotion to offspring is common in the animal kingdom. Mama bears, elephants, buffalo, lions, leopards, whales, and humans all fiercely protect their young. They'll take on an adversary twice their size to save their children. We do that because nothing in life has greater meaning than protecting our children.

I have been protected and nurtured by many. My eldest sister, Rajni, worked harder than I did to help me study for admission into medical school, even though she didn't get into medicine. This was despite my phenomenal ability to annoy her with my

innately naughty disposition. My elder sister Sandhya became my caregiver for the entire time I was in medical school. She tended to every little need. When my father, Sahib, was working away from home, which he had to do for most of his career to support the family, my elder brother Kishore became the father figure for the family and made many sacrifices to his career to support us all. I cannot recall any of my wants that my father and brother didn't meet.

Several decades ago, my mother, Shashi, and I once fell from our scooter after being hit by a pig that suddenly emerged from a side bush as we were driving. Having sustained a concussion and only partially conscious, my mother kept repeating one question: "Are you OK, Amit? Are you OK?" When I said yes, she would lie down, reassured. In a few minutes, she would wake up asking the same question. This went on for about fifteen minutes.

Beyond my immediate family, I have seen countless selfless actions that fill me with hope and pride for humanity. My friend and colleague Sam recently donated a kidney to his brother. When I asked how long it took him to decide, he said, "Less than thirty seconds. My brother needed a kidney, and I had a spare one. What was there to think?" Another colleague of mine, when asked what makes her happiest, replied, "I am most happy when I see my husband happy." I wish we all had such brothers, spouses, and friends.

Personally, there are many in the world who are more precious to me than I am to myself. In fact, every child in the world is more precious to me than I am to myself. If you find greater meaning than yourself in the young, then you are aligned with the way nature operates. For example, during pregnancy, nature ensures that the fetus gets enough iron and calcium, even if that entails depleting the mother of these essential minerals. *Ubuntu*, an ethical concept of South African origin, beautifully captures the essence of meaning: **we are because we belong. The best way to live for yourself is to live for the world. The people and purpose you serve power all your efforts.**

Building (working). Many of us across different species invest large chunks of our lives, even putting our lives on the line, in the service of what we build and protect. Take the example of honeybees and ants. The life of a honeybee is completely devoted to maintaining the home, raising the young, and serving the queen. They willingly sacrifice their lives to save the queen. Ants are very similar. So are squirrels, tucking away nuts for the winter. You can do few activities eight hours a day, week after week, for thirty to forty years of your life, other than work.

Our identities are often related to our core contributions to the world. We don't define an apple tree by its leaves or stem. We call it honeycrisp or red delicious based on the apple it produces. **Together, we are (or, I believe, should be) involved in just**

one business: building a better, kinder, happier, and more hope-filled world for our planet's children. Each of us uniquely contributes toward this job. Society provides different financial rewards based on the perceived difficulty and value of the job. Yet each job is of value. In a hospital, a janitor, volunteer, chef, nurse, lab technician, administrator, and medical provider are all doing just one thing: serving the patients. The same applies to every company, government office, nonprofit, or other organization. **Honor the meaning (how one serves the world), not just the means (the skills one uses).**

The more we can identify with our core business (building a better world), the greater meaning it will provide. A farmer could see himself as feeding the nation, a library assistant as educating the nation, a journalist as informing the nation, and an actor as entertaining the nation. **A meaning larger than oneself can be a beacon of light for journeying into the future and a reliable source of strength in difficult times.**

A friend of mine shared this story of Tim, one of his mentors. Tim was part of a team involved in a three-year education project that he was passionate about. Halfway into the project, he received an ominous diagnosis that gave him only six months to live. He called an urgent meeting. Everyone was thinking that Tim would withdraw from the project. To their surprise, here is what he said: "We have got only six months now to deliver this baby. Let's triple our effort. I won't allow myself to be buried without this being done." They all worked hard, and Tim lived to see his project go live. I feel inspired by his passion and commitment.

Becoming. A colleague wants to have a building named after him; another wants to be surrounded by people seeking her autograph. The Nobel Prize fascinates some; others desire to become president of their neighborhood unions. Some want to have a girl child, some want to have a boy, and some want to adopt. We carry a concept of what will make us complete, and that is what guides our lives.

When I lived in a four-hundred-square-foot home with no decent play area outside and no defined bedroom inside, I dreamed of a neighborhood with a play area and a home with a personal bedroom. Working at a primary health center overseas at which the only available antibiotic was ampicillin, I aspired to be at a place where I could practice medicine the way it should be practiced. Both these aspirations guided a significant part of my initial efforts in life; I am grateful to have lived to see them satisfied.

The challenge with the human mind is that what you aspire to become or acquire often stops satisfying you once you achieve it. For most of the first two decades of my life, I seldom had access to hot water. Taking a shower in the winter was pure torture. A

few years into having hot water, I found myself complaining that the water pressure wasn't strong enough. This revision of expectations would continue unless I choose to give it a pause. Hence the need for becoming altruistic—focused on others.

Have high altruistic aspirations. My personal two-word mission for this life is “eliminate suffering.” We can't eliminate pain; in fact, if we lose pain receptors in our feet, we risk losing our feet. Similarly, if we lose the ability to experience emotional pain, we risk losing compassion for others' pain. But we can always help provide comfort to others hurting and, when feasible, help them find meaning in their pain. You can craft your own short mission that aligns with your worldview and skill set. Bringing kindness to all the children, eliminating loneliness, curing cancer, ending poverty, removing discrimination, helping everyone gain access to safe water—working toward these or other such goals can continue to inspire you all your life.

Believing (spirituality or a belief system). Belonging, building, and becoming all depend on the external world. They are vulnerable to the shifting priorities of individuals and corporations, geopolitical issues, the whims of human minds, and the sheer uncertainty of the world. One aspect of meaning that isn't vulnerable to worldly uncertainties and that can support all the other meanings comes from spirituality or a belief system. Because of the sheer strength of the meaning that spirituality provides, those of us anchored in this meaning become deeply invested in it, are protected by it, and go to great lengths to protect it.

In support of an ideology or faith, people can march on rocks or fire despite all sorts of physical discomfort. From prolonged fasting to abstaining, forest dwelling, giving away all possessions, burning one's skin, and practicing other extreme forms of self-mortification, people act in all kinds of physically painful ways because the related spiritual gain is a good bargain in their perception. I personally saw many such actions during the first twenty-seven years of my life living in India.

Practicing one's faith and observing the rituals aligned with the faith can unite large swaths of humanity into cohesive groups. The more your spiritual meaning (believing) can support the other three meanings (belonging, building, and becoming), the better for you and the world. Spiritual meaning that forces us to reject others or pick up arms against each other can be a very destructive force, particularly because individuals feel totally justified and inspired, even exhilarated, in defending such meaning. The owner of such meaning sees nothing wrong with it, unlike others at the receiving end of the spears.

Spiritual meaning relates to what you consider sacred. It could be preserving nature, serving others, religious explorations, following teachings of a book, or something else. Spiritual meaning is very personal. Often, such spiritual meaning

begins to form early in life. The earlier we can help anchor the next generation in a more altruistic way of believing and the more this can be done globally, the greater chance we have of surviving on this planet long enough to truly figure out the answer to the question of the ultimate meaning of life.

Our relationships, actions, desired identities, and spiritual identities are the four constructs that are like the four dimensions (space and time) defining our place in this world. These four constructs provide us a strong scaffold with which to build our lives. The greater our engagement with these areas, the more we get pulled into the world around us. They can, however, also tie us down, pushing us into a darker abyss of hatred, envy, and crime. A healthy integration of vertical meaning (believing) with horizontal meaning (belonging, building, and becoming) can provide you a lifelong recipe for peace and excellence.

The more meaning centric your day is, the greater your efficiency, happiness, health, and longevity—the meaning in finding meaning.

Meaning in Finding Meaning

Let me say in one breath the different benefits of finding meaning. In one's personal life, having a sense of meaning improves physical health, enhances self-care (better diet and exercise), decreases risk of infection, lowers pain, enhances emotional well-being, lowers mental-health issues, enhances coping, and increases longevity.^{1,2} Several of these changes, such as improvement in diet and physical activity, have positive effects on many other aspects of life. **For example, in an interesting Australian study, increasing fruits and veggies increased happiness to the same extent as moving from unemployment to employment.**³

Having a sense of meaning decreases the risk of heart attack by as much as 25 percent.⁴ At work, meaning improves focus, performance, and job satisfaction, leading to lower turnover. In fact, with respect to career success, the more people focus on healthy sharing and giving, the higher they rise compared with those who focus only on taking.⁵

Finding meaning is an effective analgesic for both physical and emotional pain. In an interesting study, researchers found that the same area of the brain helps with the search for meaning, the placebo response to pain, and the activation of descending analgesic pathways in the brain.⁶ This provides the physiological explanation for how finding meaning can tangibly decrease the severity of both emotional and physical pain.

Shared meaning also improves relationships. People perceive their best days at work to be when they rejoice in professional relationships and spend several hours in quality social time. In research, the optimal amount of social time was about six hours each day.⁷ Social time includes talking on the phone, interacting with clients, attending group meetings, and participating in online chats. Enjoyable social time not only improves the quality of the days but also preserves memory and can even increase longevity.^{8,9}

An important recent observation was that **having a sense of meaning and purpose can completely reverse the adverse effects of loneliness on inflammatory gene expression.**¹⁰ We cannot always eliminate loneliness, but we can help give people a sense of meaning that resonates with their worldview, which may be a useful interim solution.

Meaning improves work performance. People perform better on days they feel motivated and feel good about their work and their team. Interestingly, research shows that their best days at work are when two conditions are met: they make progress and are appropriately praised. **Progress without recognition and praise without progress are both unhelpful.**¹¹ Meaning is a motivator and is the culmination of the integrated physical, emotional, and cognitive efforts that drive one to excellence.^{12,13}

Despite all these benefits of finding meaning, a high proportion of us either do not think about meaning or struggle with it. In a survey of over 12,000 employees, 50 percent felt they lacked meaning and significance at work.¹⁴ This is unfortunate because, **not uncommonly, our meaning is right in front of us. We just can't see it.** I have no doubt that if you search, you'll find a deeper meaning both for your efforts and also for many (but not all) of your adversities.

SEARCHING MEANING

When we don't have our North Star, then we struggle with finding direction, moving more like driftwood and not like the focused Jet Ski. Such a journey also produces angst. A full 50 percent do not find work satisfying, 50 to 80 percent have moderate to high levels of work-related stress, and 70 percent of us are not engaged or are actively disengaged at work.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Clearly, finding a deeper meaning can serve us and our society well. Here are a few ideas.

Depth of Inquiry

The deeper you look, the more meaning you will find. If you look deep enough, even the most mundane activities might start looking meaningful. When I was about ten years old, I watched a Hindi movie named *Boot Polish*, which was about a little boy and girl who were orphans. They were raised by an unkind aunt, but they found an unkempt but good-hearted mentor on the street. He taught them to live with dignity and not spend their lives panhandling. The little boy (who was about my age in the movie) worked hard and collected enough money to buy a kit for setting up a street-side boot-polish shop. The boy was extremely excited about his future as a boot-polish boy. I remember crying while watching the scene in which he told his sister, "I will be the best boot-polish boy. I will polish people's boots so well that they can see their face in their boot." That movie left a deep impact on me about the dignity of work. **No work is too small or too large. As long as you serve with passion and joy, your work can provide you a deeper meaning.**

Often, you just have to spend some time exploring the depth. Think about how your software code is helping an end user, your teaching is raising future citizens, your social work is bringing hope and homes to families, or your taxi is providing a safe commute to many. **Do not peg your self-worth on the dollars society provides you; peg your self-worth on the people you serve and the values you live by.** If you don't make an effort to find deeper meaning, then even the deepest thoughts and actions will look superficial. Carl Jung aptly said, "The least of things with meaning is worth more in life than the greatest of things without it."

Be Flexible

Meaning is individual and changes with context and time. Fulfilling an essential need, providing comfort, bringing pleasure, educating, helping relationships, tending to nature, innovating cost-effective solutions, enhancing beauty, spreading good values,

creating legacy—all of these and many more are worthy pursuits. The world needs all of them.

No need to be biased against someone, as long as he or she does not seek meaning in harming others. Pushing elevator buttons were tremendously meaningful to my five-year-old. If I accidentally forgot to let her do that, she would invariably press many buttons, and I would end up apologizing to smiling co-passengers. Just as others are, I am sure I am stuck in some elevator-button equivalent today that I will grow out of.

Time and Meaning

Past, present, and future are all meaningful. The past gives us context and is a great teacher, life happens in the present, and we look forward to the future. We tend to get stuck in one time zone, often the most hurtful one. I have an elderly family member stuck in the past, mostly in regrets; a young cousin stuck in the future, mostly in concerns; and another cousin stuck in the present, mostly frustrated with the daily grind. Intentionality and strong attention can help you overcome this instinct, so you focus more on where joy is rather than where hurt resides.

About the hurtful past, ask yourself, “Can I find gratitude in this? Is this the tuition I had to pay?” Remember that **the more painful the hurt, the longer it takes for us to find meaning**. About the concerning future, ask yourself, “Will it matter in five years? Is my pain likely to help someone else in pain? What is my future concern teaching me about who I am?” About the unsatisfactory present, ask yourself, “Is this a step back that will eventually be a move forward? Can I see the good in what seems bad? Are my expectations realistic, or do they need to be tweaked?” It isn’t so much where you are focusing, whether it’s the past, present, or future; more important for your well-being is the attitude you carry when you focus and the flexibility with which you can shift your perspective from the past to the present to the future.

Self versus Other

Who is your primary customer? Is it just the self or the collective? They do not have to conflict. **You can serve the self to serve the collective**. When Mother Teresa started her work, she would often give away her lunch to hungry children. How can one eat if one is seeing hunger and malnutrition all around? A few days into her daily routine, she passed out. Her mentor, understanding her compassionate disposition, advised her to take care of herself so that she could better serve others.

In order to integrate self and other, build your eulogy and CV simultaneously.¹⁸ Building only one or the other may not be enough. **Your CV will help you grow professionally; your eulogy will help you grow as a human being.** Eventually the two will become integrated and mutually supportive, like the two wheels of a bicycle; building one builds the other.

Choose Meaning

Subjectivity rules most aspects of life. I used to sit on study sections for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and editorial boards of journals, and I have thus participated in some of the most rigorous reviews of research grants and papers. I am amazed at how subjective some of the evaluations can be. Often, one person's opinion can change the direction of the conversation and sway every other expert in the room.

On a trip, I once bought a refurbished iPad for my eight-year-old. I called her on the phone from the Minneapolis airport to tell her I was getting a gift for her. Thinking she might be happy to hear it, I told her I was getting an iPad. She started crying, not happy tears but sad ones. I was confused; I thought an iPad would be a pretty awesome gift for her, way beyond her expectations.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

She replied, "Why did you tell me what you're getting? It's not a surprise anymore." For her the surprise element was more meaningful than the gift itself!

When you give someone a birthday gift, that person can interpret it so many ways. The best interpretation is gratitude that you remembered and made the effort. But the possibilities are many: what a cheap gift (you don't care about me), what an expensive gift (you're trying to show off), what a good choice, what a poor choice, now I have to remember to give you something on your birthday, this seems like recycled material, and more. **The same gift can have many meanings depending on the person receiving it.**

There are some events, however, that can't be interpreted in many different ways. An unspeakable act of human aggression is perhaps one of them. But in most situations, the meaning you make out of the experience is completely up to you. Recognize its tremendous power in influencing your feeling of how well your life is going.

The Three Questions

On an introspective day, meditate on these three questions: Who am I? Why do I exist? What is this world? I have spent some time pondering these ideas to come up with a construct that is believable (in my mind) and practical yet deep enough to be solid. **I believe that we are agents of service and love, that we exist to make a kinder and happier world for our planet's children, and that this world is a giant school of learning.**

I try not to define who I am with narrower titles, such as physician, attorney, librarian, teacher, grocery clerk, or others. That has the potential for creating judgments, since our society doesn't reward every profession the same way. Service and love connect all these themes. **We are all agents of service and love**, making our unique contributions based on our skills and capacity.

Whenever in doubt, I ask myself which of my actions is most likely to help the planet's children? The answer to that question almost always points me in the right direction. **I believe our evolutionary responsibility is to create a better world for our children.** Thoughts, words, and actions that serve this purpose are less likely to go astray.

The world isn't for plundering while pursuing pleasure. We are because the world is. The world is our teacher. Through each experience, we gain wisdom in how to better express love as compassion, connection, attention, and caring. **I believe the best job in the world is that of being a student.** It helps you to be humble and accept your vulnerability. A learning brain remains plastic and young, which helps with future learning.¹⁹ These changes in the brain can be seen on sophisticated scans with as little as one week of training.²⁰ **Never give up your job of being a student.**

Short Term versus Long Term

Most likely you have at least a rough idea of what you want to do in life. Perhaps a clear idea. The challenge is to **align your daily actions with long-term meaning.** Very likely, you want to be healthier, happier, and more successful, and you want to have better relationships, be more respected, and touch many lives. All of this requires hard work, because you'll need self-control. You will have to say no to dessert, get out of bed when you would rather snooze, work on projects and with people you would rather avoid, cultivate patience, better respond to others' annoyances, go the extra mile to help others, and work on boring assignments day after day after day. **Creating long-term meaning is easier than implementing it.** But you have to start somewhere.

Perhaps pick one or two elements of your long-term meaning and act on them. You can incrementally add individual elements as your capacity allows.

Celebrate the Process

Most researchers live in the future. Often, the first time they pause to celebrate a research project is when the project is completed and the manuscript written, accepted, and published. Until then, it is just the grind. Such an approach leads to quicker burnout, particularly if the grants come in slowly and rejections come fast. **I believe in celebrating the milestones.** Not the extravagant all-night-party kind of celebration, but a simple one like a celebration with ice cream when the grant is submitted, a pizza party with a favorable review (with healthy pizza), or a social in the office when the participants start enrolling. The same can be applied to a software project or any other endeavor. **Waiting to celebrate at the finish line is too late.**

Like celebration, the more meaning you can find in the process done well rather than the outcome achieved, the better your focus will be, with potentially better outcome. **Your effort and intentions, and not the outcome, are in your control. Peg your self-worth on your effort and intentions, not on the outcome.**

Ten-Minutes Test

How do I prioritize? What is important? What is incredibly important? I have come to realize the value of each letter after I opened a Twitter account. With 140 characters at my disposal to convey an idea, each character is precious. Since I send no more than one tweet on most days, I wish for them to be meaningful. Sometimes a 1,400-character (or about a 200-word) blog post takes the same time to write as a 140-character tweet. The same applies to prioritizing in life.

When you are faced with little time to pack all the important stuff, then you get to the essence. Let's say you have only ten minutes to wrap up your entire life. In that time, you're allowed to write a few messages and call a few people. What will you write, and whom will you call? This exercise might give you insight into what is most meaningful to you.

Realize that each of the meanings is particular to your present mortal life. The human mind cannot access the ultimate meaning that connects all our individual meanings. Instead of asking, "What is the meaning of life?" it is better to ask, "What is the meaning of *my* life?"

LET'S BUILD IT TOGETHER

We will leverage the above understanding in three steps while creating objective score:

Step 1: Rank Your Meaning

Rank in order of importance the four domains (Belonging, Building, Becoming, Believing) that are the most to the least meaningful to you at this point. You can assign more than one domain to a particular score (e.g. both believing and belonging may receive the 4 score):

		Importance Score
Most meaningful		4
(Belonging, Building, Becoming, Believing)		3
		2
		1
Least meaningful		

Step 2: The Most Short-changed

Think about the four meanings and rank them from the meaning that you have paid the least attention to, to the one you have paid the most attention.

		Short-changed Score
Most short-changed		4
(Belonging, Building, Becoming, Believing)		3
		2
		1
Least short-changed		

Step 3: Selecting Where to Invest

Now add the above two scores for each of the meanings.

	Total Score
Belonging	
Building	
Becoming	
Believing	

The two meanings with the highest score likely will provide you the maximum “return on investment.”

Now think about what you can do to invest more of your energy in what is most meaningful.

Your Top Two meanings	Two things you can do <u>more</u> to increase engagement with the meaningful	Two things you can do <u>less</u> to increase engagement with the meaningful
	1.	1.
	2.	2.
	1.	1.
	2.	2.

I hope you are able to find greater meaning in these two weeks.

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