

The Courage to Find Meaning

By Gary Burnison, CEO of Korn Ferry

Life is a series of moments, both highs and lows. While we naturally gravitate toward the highs, we cannot—and should not—ignore, nor tolerate, the lows. And now another tragic incident: the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, a city I've been to many times.

There have been so many, too many lows recently. It's completely unsettling. The global divide between haves and have-nots. The divisive political landscape. The fight for equality. The ongoing pandemic. The tragedy in Lebanon. The first major hurricane in what's expected to be a destructive season.... And so much more across the globe.

Paradoxically, but powerfully, these profound experiences of loss, pain, outrage, and inequality are where we can find the deepest meaning.

Our Link to Others

Where there is purpose, we also find other people. Otherwise, our "why" is all about ourselves—and that's hardly enduring. Our firm's research shows that purposes and values that benefit others are more meaningful

than those that focus only on one's self and one's own pleasure, profit, or advancement. In fact, having a lopsided focus only on ourselves and what we want can lead to a feeling of emptiness.

To become more purpose-driven and generate more meaning—to motivate ourselves and each other—we must first look within. Here we find our gifts. For the individual, the gift might be creativity; for the organization, it might be collective genius. Even disparate pieces can be turned into a mosaic of possibility—an ethos of more inclusiveness.

Once we find them, we must give our gifts. When generously shared, our gifts can change people's lives. Even the smallest acts of kindness will be treasured.

We must also continuously grow our gifts—by having the humility and empathy to walk in another person's shoes. Only by identifying what we have and seeing what others need can we move beyond self-interest to the shared interest of meaning.

Our Quest for Meaning

When the world turns upside down, everything goes out the window. Suddenly, “what” we’ve always done and “how” we’ve always done it no longer apply—in humanity or business. The one saving grace is a deep and enduring “why”—a meaning that’s more important than ever.

When the why is missing, so is the motivation to change. We lack a potent fuel—a driving force for a better world. That’s why purpose precedes the first step of every journey. Indeed, finding meaning is fundamental to how people approach their lives—both personal and professional.

Those who elevate energy through a captivating “why” will attract others—and drive collective momentum toward action. Not a pledge, not a slogan, not random words on paper. Action.

Our Opportunity to Find Meaning

Surrounded by the senseless loss of life, whether on our streets or in our hospital wards, we need to have the courage to search for meaning beyond ourselves. In painful losses—whether by deaths, broken relationships, health crises, lost opportunities, lack of equality, loneliness—even when it feels like there is no hope, we can still find meaning.

When strong emotions run high, we need to look beyond the emotionality of the situation. We need to focus on understanding. If our intentions are good and we want to make a positive impact, even if we don’t say

the right thing—whether when offering empathy and understanding or trying to help—it’s better to say and do something and risk making a mistake than stay silent.

Just as no decision is still a decision, no action is still an action. So, what can we do?

- Engage in constructive dialogues and emotion processing with family, friends, colleagues and our community.
- Reframe and redefine our purpose—our mission and the impact we wish to make on the world—based on what is most important to each of us, our values, where we find meaning, and what we can deliver.
- Make purposeful decisions and act with consciousness about the consequences.

While we are all different, our common humanity, empathy, and genuine caring unite us as we process our highs and lows and search for meaning.

Our firm has led several thousand executives in an exercise of reflecting on their entire lives—through significant moments from the +10 highs to the -10 lows. Time and again, they expressed how the most formative moments of their lives were often their lows—a surprisingly universal truth.

Over time, what were once losses become lessons in meaning, empathy, and appreciation of our differences. And we are transformed.

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