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The Search for the Meaning of Life May be as Important as Finding It

By Barbara E. Thompson
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Throughout my lifetime, I have been a seeker of purpose and meaning.

I was a questioning child, always asking my parents and teachers: “Why?”

My fourth grade teacher once shared with my mom that every answer she provided was immediately followed by yet another question.

I have come to believe this is part of my very nature, my person, as the questions continue to this day.

Most of my questions are about people and why they behave in certain ways, sometimes with love and compassion, sometimes with hatred and cruelty, and sometimes with detachment and indifference. At times I have felt a desperate need to understand, driven to explore human behavior to the point where I finally “get it.” At the same time, however, I recognize there is no “it,” no single view of people that answers all of the questions.

The richness of people relies on a full range of views and perspectives, and so no “it” could encompass the complexity and diversity of the human experience.

In my search for purpose and meaning, I feel impatient at times, and as part of these moments I experience countless emotions, including anger and frustration.

There are happenings in this world that remind me that “progress” in terms of genuinely respecting and caring about one another does not occur in a forward-moving, straight-line fashion – and doesn’t necessarily mean my definition of “progress.” I am learning to embrace my impatience, recognizing that often this impatience drives me to be passionate about what matters most to me. But I also am learning to forgive my impatience.

After almost three decades of facilitating diversity and inclusion educational experiences, I have strong internal messaging that it is important to consistently meet people where they are and create a place of openness and understanding in my classroom and beyond. I am an educator and I believe in creating this space. And so, I am me, and then again another me, impatient and patient with myself and those around me.

There is a poem I strongly identify with by the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1956, Juan Ramón Jiménez, entitled *I Am Not I*. It reads:

I am not I.

I am this one

walking beside me whom I do not see,

whom at times I manage to visit,

and whom at other times I forget;

who remains calm and silent while I talk,

and forgives, gently, when I hate,

who walks where I am not,

who will remain standing when I die.

I relate to the “duality of person” in the poem and have reflected a great deal on the last line: “who will remain standing when I die.” For me this involves what I am passionate about: contributing to a world where people care universally, extending beyond themselves and even those they love most deeply.

Perhaps my consuming passion is to explore with other people what it means to be touched by injustice and cruelty, and then do something about it – passion realized through action.

I sometimes think that finding purpose and meaning in life is not really about finding it as much as it is about continuing the search. At least, I believe this may be the case for me. My search involves growth and an evolution of my perspective as I learn about the views and experiences of other people.

I constantly consider and reconsider my perspective on the world. My search involves being open to going around the next corner, and the next, and the next. It drives me and supports my passion to somehow better life for all of us. It has no boundaries, no ending point.

And so, I reflect on becoming comfortable with no answer to the question “What is the purpose and meaning of my life?”

I invite you to help me in my exploration by sharing your perspective on finding purpose and meaning. I am open to modifying my understanding of the world.

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