

## **Meaning and Purpose in a Non-Western Modernity**

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### **Abstract**

A deep and rich sense of life meaning and purpose is a vital component of health and wellbeing, according to research studies in psychology and cognitive neuroscience. Mainstream opinion in the United States public sphere typically perceives God as the key to life meaning and purpose. Moreover, many studies confirm that frequent church attendance correlates with a stronger sense of meaning and purpose. However, correlation is not causation, and this article will dig deeper into the data to find out what kind of decisions actually helps people gain a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. A more thorough look at the literature demonstrates that belief in God and religious affiliation is only one means of gaining meaning and purpose in life. Non-western modern societies that are more secular find means other than religion to satisfy people's needs for a deep sense of meaning and purpose. This paper will use the case study of the Soviet Union to demonstrate how one modern secularly-oriented society did so through club activities. It shows how people formed deep social bonds in state-sponsored community settings through club activities. Such bonds and community belonging helped Soviet citizens find a deep sense of meaning and purpose, and lead to their support of the Soviet system, meeting the goals of the Soviet leadership and the personal needs and desires of Soviet citizens alike. The article thus concludes that the Soviet authorities, at least in the late 1950s and 60s, created a system that shaped the decisions of Soviet citizens along the lines favored by the regime.

*Keywords:* meaning, purpose, health, well-being, secularism, religion, Soviet Union, western

### **Introduction**

A deep and rich sense of life meaning and purpose is a vital component of health and wellbeing, according to research studies. Mainstream opinion in the United States public sphere typically perceives God as the key to life meaning and purpose. Moreover, many studies confirm that frequent church attendance correlates with a stronger sense of meaning and purpose. However, correlation is not causation, and this article will dig deeper into the data to find out what actually helps people gain a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. A more thorough look at the literature demonstrates that belief in God and religious affiliation is only one means of gaining meaning and purpose in life. The paper will then use the case study of the Soviet Union to show how

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modern and publicly secular societies helped their members find meaning and purpose.

### **Meaning & Purpose: Health & Wellbeing Benefits**

What is the health benefit of finding a sense of meaning and purpose in life? Research shows people who have a clear answer have better lives (Seligman, 2002). They can deal much better with both everyday life and the most challenging situations. The classic research on meaning and purpose comes from Victor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist who lived through the concentration camps of the Holocaust. Frankl (1964) described how those who had a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives were most likely to survive and thrive in the camps. He conducted research demonstrating this both during and after his concentration camp experience. His research has since been carried onward by many, especially the Viktor Frankl Institute in Vienna.

Recent studies illustrate that people who feel that their life has meaning and purpose experience a substantially higher degree of mental wellbeing. For example, Michael F. Steger, a psychologist and Director of the Laboratory for the Study of Meaning and Quality of Life at Colorado State University, found that many people gain a great deal of psychological benefit from understanding what their lives are about and how they fit within the world around them (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). His research demonstrates that people who have a strong sense of meaning and purpose have greater mental wellbeing in general; they are more satisfied on a day-to-day basis, as well as at work (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler 2006). Adolescents, in another study, are shown to feel less depressed and anxious, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors the greater their search for, and sense of, meaning (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011).

A deeper sense of life meaning and purpose also predicts better physical health. Greater meaning and purpose has been associated with a reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease (Boyle, Buchman, Barnes, & Bennett, 2010). An increased sense of life meaning and purpose correlates with reduced risk of heart attack, the leading cause of death in the United States, and stroke, another of the top five leading causes of death (Kim, Sun, Park, Kubzansky, & Peterson, 2013; Kim, Sun, Park, & Peterson, 2013). With such benefits for mental and physical wellbeing, it is no wonder that a strong sense of life meaning and purpose predicts longevity, whether in the United States or around the world (Boyle, 2009). Moreover, evaluation mechanisms have been developed to assess one's meaning and purpose (McDonald, Wong, & Gingras, 2012).

### **Public Opinion on Meaning & Purpose**

According to mainstream faith-based perspectives, the meaning and purpose of life is to be found only in the divine. One example of a prominent religious thinker is Karl Barth, one of the most important Protestant thinkers of modern times. In his *The Epistle to the Romans* (1933), he calls modern people's attention to God in Christ, where the true meaning and purpose of life must be found.

A more recent example that strongly impacted the public sphere is *The Purpose Driven Life*, a best-selling book written by Rick Warren (2002), a Christian mega church leader. He outlines five purposes for human beings:

We were planned for God's pleasure, so your first purpose is to offer real worship. We were formed for God's family, so your second purpose is to enjoy real fellowship. We were created to become like Christ, so your third purpose is to learn real discipleship. We were shaped for serving God, so your fourth purpose is to practice real ministry. We were

made for a mission, so your fifth purpose is to live out real evangelism. (Purpose Driven, 11-12)

But some thinkers disagree with the notion that religion is the only way to find meaning and purpose in life. Jean-Paul Sartre (1957), in his *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, advances the notions of “existentialism,” the philosophical perspective that all meaning and purpose originates from the individual. The challenge for modern individuals, according to Sartre, is to face all the consequences of the discovery of the absence of God. He argues that people must learn to create for themselves meaning and purpose.

Another prominent thinker is Greg Epstein. In Epstein’s (2009) *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*, he advocates striving for dignity as a means of finding “meaning to life beyond God” According to Epstein,

We are not wicked, debased, helpless creatures waiting for a heavenly king or queen to bless us with strength, wisdom, and love. We have the potential for strength, wisdom, and love inside ourselves. But by ourselves we are not enough. We need to reach out beyond ourselves—to the world that surrounds us and sustains us, and most especially to other people. This is dignity. (pg 93).

We can also consider the perspective brought by Shermer (2000), who states in *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science*,

I am often asked by believers why I abandoned Christianity and how I found meaning and purpose in the apparently meaning and purposeless universe presented by science. The implication is that the scientific worldview is an existentially depressing one. Without God, I am bluntly told, what’s the point? If this is all there is, there is no use. To the contrary. For me, quite the opposite is true. The conjuncture of losing my religion, finding science, and discovering glorious contingency was remarkably empowering and liberating. It gave me a sense of joy and freedom. Freedom to think for myself. Freedom to take responsibility for my own actions. Freedom to construct my own meaning and purposes and my own destinies. With the knowledge that this may be all there is, and that I can trigger my own cascading changes, I was free to live life to its fullest. (p. 236)

Likewise, Harris (2014), in his book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*, states that

Separating spirituality from religion is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It is to assert two important truths simultaneously: Our world is riven by dangerous religious doctrines that all educated people should condemn, and yet there is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit. (p. 6)

Are they correct? Can we have meaning and purpose, which fall within the sphere that Harris refers to as spirituality, Shermer as living life to the fullest, and Epstein as dignity, without believing in a deity and belonging to a faith-based community?

### **Research on Religion’s Role in Life Meaning & Purpose**

First, it is vital to recognize that studies show that a strong sense of meaning and purpose correlates with strong religious belief. Research on the psychology of religion illustrates that “for many, the most salient core psychological function of religion is to provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life” (Batson & Stocks, 2004, p. 149). Survey-based studies affirm such individually-oriented psychological research. For example, a study of the population of Memphis found that the extent to which religion had salience in a person’s life correlated with a heightened

sense of meaning and purpose (Petersen & Roy, 1985). Another study used the General Social Survey, which tracks demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions across the United States. The researcher investigated how the degree of belief in God relates to a personal sense of life purpose. The data showed that people who indicated they are confident in the existence of God self-report a higher sense of life purpose compared to those who believe but occasionally doubt, and to nonbelievers (Cranney, 2013).

Parallels exist in global comparative research on religion and life purpose. One study encompassing 79 countries and using the World Values Survey, found that more religious people in more religious countries experience a greater sense of life satisfaction across a variety of dimensions, including life meaning and purpose (Steger, Dik, & Okulicz-Kozaryna, 2010). A 2007 survey by Gallup of 84 countries used the following question, “Do you feel your life has an important meaning or purpose?” The report on this survey highlighted the following as the brief summary:

Takeaway: Regardless of whether they affiliate themselves with a religion, more than 8 in 10 respondents across 84 countries say their lives have an important meaning or purpose. However, religion does make a difference: Those who claim no religious affiliation are more than twice as likely as those who do claim one to say they do not feel their lives have an important purpose. (Crabtree & Pelham, 2008)

Such generalized takeaways provide support for mainstream opinions and religion-oriented thinkers who use such findings to support their claims that religion is the way to gain meaning and purpose. Yet digging deeper into the data raises questions about the evidence for such claims. For example, the study cited above on 79 countries also found that more religious people have less life satisfaction, including a sense of meaning and purpose, in less religious countries. Moreover, forms of worship that do not promote social connectedness do not correlate with a heightened sense of life satisfaction (Steger, Dik, & Okulicz-Kozaryna, 2010). Other studies illustrate similar findings. For instance, religious affiliation with community belonging leads to a higher degree of life satisfaction than religious devotion in private settings (Bergan & McConatha, 2001). Another investigation underscored that extrinsic religious devotion, meaning a focus on religion for means such as in-group participation and social status, correlates with higher happiness and life meaning. However, intrinsic religious orientation, defined as religion that is deeply personal and defining one’s lifestyle, does not correlate with a greater sense of happiness and life meaning (Sillick & Cathcart, 2014). Furthermore, research indicates that those who engage with such deep questions in a setting that does not expect conformity to a specific dogma overall gain a deeper perception of meaning and purpose (Wong, 2012). In other words, the most impactful sense of meaning and purpose stems from an intentional analysis of one’s self understanding and path in life and a consequent experience of personal agency, the quality of living intentionally (Tsipursky, 2013). To be clear, one can find deep meaning and purpose from belief in a higher power, but it is best if one comes to that conclusion oneself after deep self-reflection and analysis, as opposed to just conforming to group and social norms, as is often the case with religion.

### **Psychology & Neuroscience Research on Meaning & Purpose**

These results should make us question the perception of causation between religion, meaning, and purpose. After all, the data seems to show that socially-oriented religious practice in religious communities leads to a stronger sense of life meaning and purpose, while private and

inner-oriented religious practice does not. So is it religion as such that leads to a deep sense of meaning and purpose, or is it a case of correlation rather than causation? Might it be that it is instead social and community bonds that lead to a deep sense of life meaning?

Research conclusively demonstrates that social affiliation is key to a deep sense of life purpose, regardless of religious affiliation. As an example, four studies showed significant correlation between whether people experience a sense of belonging and their perception of life meaning and purpose. Study 1 highlighted a correlation between questions asking for a sense of belonging and life purpose at the same time. Study 2 strove to remove the possible biasing that may occur by asking these questions at the same time. It first asked people about their sense of belonging, and 3 weeks later inquired into their sense of life meaning. The data was similarly indicative of a clear correlation between belonging and life meaning. Studies 3 and 4 primed participants to experience a sense of belonging and a variety of other experiences, and found that priming people to experience belonging resulted in the highest perception of life meaning for study participants (Lambert et al., 2013). A meta-review of many studies on life meaning and purpose similarly indicates social belonging as vital to a sense of life purpose (Steger, 2012).

Such findings should not be surprising. Much recent social neuroscience underscores the vital role of social bonds for how our brains function. Indeed, our brain is inherently designed to be sociable, as part of our evolutionary development. The force of evolution selected for mutations that make our brains more social, as human ancestors best survived in groups, and those most capable of being socially oriented tended to outcompete those who were not. Thus, social neuroscience research indicates that when we engage with others, we experience an intimate brain to brain linkup. That neural bridge lets us affect the brain and thus the body of everyone we engage with, just as they do to us. The more strongly we connect with someone emotionally, the greater the mutual force. The resulting feelings have far-reaching consequences that ripple throughout our body, as our brain releases hormones that regulate all biological systems (Goleman, 2006). A sense of meaning and purpose is thus neurologically correlated to social connectedness, and consequently our mental and physical wellbeing.

In fact, research shows that to gain health and wellbeing benefits, the important thing is simply to *have* a sense of meaning and purpose in life, regardless of the source of the purpose (Steger, 2012). Going back to Frankl (1964), his research suggests the crucial thing for individuals surviving and thriving is to develop a personal sense of individual purpose and confidence in a collective purpose for society itself, what he terms the will-to-meaning and purpose. Frankl himself worked to help people find meaning and purpose in their lives. He did so by helping prisoners in concentration camps, and, later, patients in his private practice as a psychiatrist, to remember their joys, sorrows, sacrifices, and blessings, thereby bringing to mind the meaningfulness and purposefulness of their lives as already lived. According to Frankl (1964), meaning and purpose can be found in any situation within which people find themselves. He emphasizes the existential meaning and purpose of suffering and tragedy in life as testimonies to human courage and dignity, as exemplified both in the concentration camps and beyond. Frankl (1964) argues that not only is life charged with meaning and purpose, but this implies responsibility, namely the responsibility upon oneself to discover meaning and purpose, both as an individual and as a member of a larger social collective.

Frankl's approach to psychotherapy came to be called logotherapy, and forms part of a broader therapeutic practice known as existential psychotherapy. This philosophically-informed therapy stems from the notion that internal tensions and conflicts stem from one's confrontation with the challenges of the nature of life itself, and relate back to the notions brought up by Sartre

and other existentialist philosophers. These challenges, according to Yalom (1980) and Mathers (2001), include facing the reality and the responsibility of our freedom; dealing with the inevitability of death; the stress of individual isolation; and, finally, the difficulty of finding meaning in life. These four issues correlate to what existential therapy holds as the four key dimensions of human existence, the physical, social, personal, and spiritual realms, based on extensive psychological research and therapy practice (Cooper, 2003).

### **Meaning & Purpose in Other Cultural Contexts: The Soviet Union as a Case Study**

A central reason for the traditional depiction of religion as the primary source of meaning and purpose in the United States results from the predominant role of religion in that society. Religion provides the main venue for social and community bonding, and thus people experience such correlation as causation. Likewise, within religious circles in the United States, there is much more focus on finding meaning and purpose, and clear answers are provided. Moreover, religion is the most common source of ritual experiences in the United States. Research on rituals shows their importance in maintaining and transmitting cultural values, including what a specific culture perceives as the key elements of meaning and purpose. Scholars also highlight how rituals serve as a vital contributor to social bonding and community belonging (Bell, 1997).

Yet the fact that religious communities have come to provide the kind of things that contribute to a sense of life meaning and purpose in the United States is a historical accident, a contingent event. In other societies, religion had and has much less relevance, and those societies find other ways to provide meaning and purpose for their members.

How do people in more secularly-oriented societies than the United States gain a sense of meaning and purpose? Well, here is an example. Mike met regularly with friends and acquaintances from his neighborhood in a large building. There, he enjoyed listening to presentations about big life questions: on the meaning of life, on the nature of morality, on ethical behavior, etc. He participated in study circles that engaged with these questions in more depth. Mike sang, danced, and enjoyed musical performances there. Together with others, he volunteered to help clean up the streets and build housing for poor people in the neighborhood. Through these activities, Mike gained social bonds and community connections, a chance to serve others, and an opportunity to reflect on life's big questions—all the components that lead to a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Mike's full name is not Michael, but Mikhail, and his experience describes the prototypical experience of former Soviet citizens in state-sponsored community activities. The former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (1995) described in his memoirs how much he and other Soviet citizens enjoyed such events: according to him, "everybody was keen to participate" (p. 35). The Soviet Union is typically perceived as a militaristic and grey society, with a government that oriented all of its efforts to taking over the world. Well, that is simply not true, as the present author's research shows. The Soviet authorities put a lot of effort into providing its citizens with opportunities to find meaning and purpose in life, as well as fun and pleasure—although they also certainly wanted to spread communism throughout the world, and put a lot of effort into this goal as well (Tsipursky, 2014).

To understand how the USSR's government helped its citizens gain a greater sense of meaning and purpose, the present author spent a decade investigating government reports in archives across the Soviet Union, exploring national and local newspapers, reading memoirs and diaries, and interviewing more than fifty former Soviet citizens. The answer? To a large extent,

meaning and purpose were built through government-sponsored community and cultural centers called *kluby* (clubs). In many ways, these venues replaced the social functions provided by churches, offering Soviet citizens social and community connections, in a setting that combined state sponsorship with grassroots engagement. Soviet clubs also hosted rituals and celebrations, which served to help people enjoy themselves and find meaning and purpose, and also to further the government's political agenda (Tsipursky, 2011).

One fascinating event was the community of youth who formed around the opera "Archimedes." This community emerged from the Moscow State University's physics department, perhaps the most prestigious department in the university, which was the most prestigious university in the USSR. Physics students there began a tradition of writing and performing operas in 1955 with "Dummy" (*Dubinushka*), and then "Grey Rock" (*Seryi Kamen*) in 1958. Students put on these two operas (or scenes from them) at graduation celebrations, amateur arts competitions, and student evenings (Kovaleva, 2003).

Such operas reached massive proportions with "Archimedes," which originated from a 1959 physics department Komsomol (Soviet Youth Communist League) conference. The conference resolved to prepare a fun springtime celebration for 1960, and to create a new festival, "Physicists' Day" (*Den' fizikov*), celebrated on the supposed birthday of Archimedes (May 7). Over the following months, physics students invested a great deal of time and energy into preparing the festivities. The 1960 celebration, attended by a huge crowd, began with performances of amateur arts, followed by a carnival-like parade, led by floats with students dressed up as famous physicists. The world-famous physicist N. D. Landau, the faculty patron of the celebration, joined the fun on one of the floats (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A photograph of the first Physicist's Day parade. Landau is in the center, wearing a black suit. Courtesy of the private archive of Marina Lebedeva.

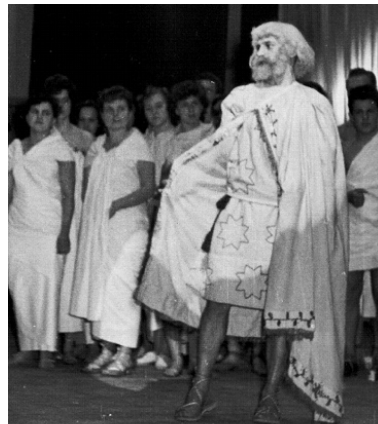


Figure 2. A photograph of a scene from "Archimedes" in which the hero challenges the Greek gods. Courtesy of the private archive of Marina Lebedeva.

After circling the university, the procession ended at the university's club building, where the students put on the opera "Archimedes" for the first time. The opera depicted the heroic Archimedes, a university dean at the University of Syracuse in Sicily, fighting for the future of physics against the Greek gods, who feared the progress of science (Figure 2).

The gods encouraged corrupt behavior by university staff and tempted students to drink and dance the twist, officially forbidden at the time.

A key moment in the show came when, as the opera's libretto states, "the students, tempted by the gods, for a minute lose their humanity, and a general dancing of the twist (*tvistopliaska*) begins." The opera's first performance was so popular that students barely fit into the overcrowded hall (Figure 3). This production combined three elements of Soviet official discourse: promotion of science and technology, criticism of bureaucratism and corruption, and disparagement of "negative" student behavior such as western-style dancing.



The present author's interviews with participants ground these developments offered an in-depth look at their impact lives, emotions, worldviews, and perceptions of self-identity among the

Through the initiative-based cultural forms of the mid-1950s, the Komsomol leadership aimed to present an appealing vision of socialist fun. These activities also met the demands of lower- and mid-level Komsomol bureaucrats, who sought to encourage rank-and-file Komsomol members to engage in Komsomol activities within official collectives, making them more likely to attend meetings, perform volunteer labor duties, and pay dues.

*Figure 3.* A photograph of the audience at the first performance of "Archimedes." Many audience members had to stand in order to fit into the hall during the show and some sat on the banisters. Courtesy of the private archive of Marina Lebedeva.

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These interviews with former "Archimedes" performers invariably revealed their eagerness for engaging in this Komsomol-organized cultural activity. Tatiana Tkacheva (personal communication, Feb. 19, 2009) enjoyed an "enormous emotional lift" from her performances in the opera. For Dmitrii Gal'tsov (personal communication, Feb. 20, 2009), it "was just fun."

"Archimedes" played a deep social role as well. In addition to singing and acting, the opera experience involved the customary post-performance banquet for its members, remembered with pleasure by Sergei Semenov (personal interview, Mar. 18, 2009) (Figure 4).



*Figure 4.* A photograph of a banquet held after an "Archimedes" performance. Courtesy of the private archive of Marina Lebedeva.

According to Ol'ga Lebedikhina (personal communication, Dec. 25, 2008), a professional vocal instructor who served as the chorus master of "Archimedes," this collective represented "real life" for its members, the center of their social world. Svetlana Shchegol'kova (personal communication, Feb. 19, 2009) confirmed the key role of the clique that formed around the opera, describing them as "friends with whom we are close and hang out with pleasure" in the present as well. The dance leader and later historian of the "Archimedes" collective, Svetlana Kovaleva (personal communication, Mar. 3, 2009),

similarly stressed the importance of the friendships forged through "Archimedes," and that the opera inspired her to consider that "we can achieve whatever we want." The co-author of the opera Valerii Miliayev (personal communication, Feb. 28, 2009) likewise underscored its crucial role in personal growth and developing social skills. For Sergei Semenov (personal communication, Mar. 18, 2009), the opera proved helpful in gaining confidence in public speaking.

As related by the "Archimedes" director Iurii Gaponov (personal communication, Apr.



29, 2009) during a five-hour interview strolling in a Moscow park, for him, “creating a collective” from among the opera participants was the key goal of the “Archimedes” project. Notably, Gaponov and other “Archimedes” members considered service in the department’s Komsomol cell and their involvement with the Physicists’ Day celebration as part of the broader complex of Komsomol work (Tsipursky 2012).

Interviewees may romanticize their days of youth and the passage of time inevitably reshapes the stories people tell about their personal experiences. Still, the recollections of “Archimedes” members about their enormous investment of emotions, time, and energy into this official cultural activity and its impact on their social lives and worldview, along with the fact that many participants remained lifelong friends who continue to treasure their memories, underscores the outsize role that the “Archimedes” collective played for many of those who performed in it. Furthermore, “Archimedes” and similar state-sponsored cultural groups underscore how such friendships could and did lead to more intense and enthusiastic collectivism, along with deeper involvement with the official Party-state structure. In this way, the Soviet authorities provided opportunities for young people to build deep social bonds, of the type that recent neuroscience research illustrates contribute much to mental wellbeing and physical health (Goleman, 2006; LeDoux, 1996).

Indeed, “Archimedes” was hardly a unique phenomenon and had many parallels to other youth-oriented institutions, such as the Kaluga “Torch” group (I. Sokolov, personal communication, Apr. 16, 2009). Even some ordinary Komsomol cells functioned in a similar fashion during the Thaw. Irina Sokol’skaia (personal communication, Nov. 8, 2008), who served as the Komsomol organizer for her college Komsomol class, adopted the sentiment that “the best Komsomol work” involved “doing something positive for her group,” and ensuring lasting friendships through entertaining organized cultural recreation, which also fit into the Komsomol’s broad agenda for normative leisure. Much like Gaponov, Sokol’skaia said that it was important for her “to create a good life for the students out of the directives coming from above.”

Interest-based clubs provided many of the same benefits, according to officials in Moscow’s Pioneer Palace. During the present author’s visit to the Palace in April 2009, he spoke with Pshenichner and Nona Kozlova, both employed there since the 1960s working with groups dedicated to aeronautics and astronomy. Kozlova (personal communication, Apr. 29, 2009) related Palace activities aimed to harness young people’s enthusiasm for astronomy in the interest both of education and moral upbringing (*vospitanie*). Both Kozlova and Pshenichner (personal communication, Apr. 29, 2009) said that young members also benefitted from professional preparation and from becoming part of collectives that remain tied to each other to the present. Apparently, former affiliates still meet to partake in astronomy-oriented activities or to socialize together at reunions. According to Valentina Miagkova (personal communication, Apr. 29, 2009), similar goals and outcomes characterized a broad range of interest-based clubs at the Pioneer Palace, which served as “a ticket to life for very many.”

Youth who performed in such cultural groups generally supported the revived drive to build communism after Stalin’s death in 1953, under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev. Frequently, they portrayed themselves as having believed in a romantic vision of communism “with a human face” during their youth. T. Tkacheva (personal communication, Jan. 20, 2009) recalled her faith and that of her friends in constructing communism. V. Miliaev (personal communication, Feb. 28, 2009) attributed the popularity of “Archimedes” to the opera fitting “the liberal spirit of the time, a spirit of freedom of expression.” Nina Deviataikina (personal

communication, May 20, 2009) described herself as “growing up in the freedom of the Khrushchev era,” which permitted her and her friends to “breathe in a new” and “relatively free fashion.” Such statements correlate with recent findings that young people in the post-Stalin years were optimistic about communism and the Soviet system, whether in the center, in the Russian provinces, or in the Soviet republics.

Such feelings accorded well with the goals of the Khrushchev leadership. In the view of O. Lebedikhina (personal communication, Dec. 25, 2008), the success of amateur arts in clubs depends on the support of both the “authorities and...ordinary people themselves.” Enthusiastic grassroots participation in state-sponsored popular culture allowed political elites to present “Soviet life as a happy life,” while simultaneously enabling the amateur artists to “find and express themselves.” While bringing people together in deep and meaningful ways, initiative-based cultural forms also functioned to ensure that a sizable number of youth became socialized in state-sponsored settings, spending their leisure in socialist time. The trope of such cultural activities forging true collectives, which resounds throughout the interviews and official sources alike, fit ideally with the Khrushchev leadership’s goals. These clubs were not hollow facades; they helped form close-knit, long-lasting community ties and social bonds, and many club members explicitly supported Khrushchev-era populist reforms. This evidence illustrates the successes experienced by the Soviet system in the later 1950s and 60s in helping youth gain meaning and purpose in social bonds and community affiliations in state-sponsored settings, and, at the same time, encouraging youth to support the Soviet system.

Present-day societies with a more secular orientation than the United States also find means other than religion to encourage citizens to support the social system and gain meaning and purpose. This is illustrated by research on contemporary Denmark and Sweden. Most Danes and Swedes do not worship any god. At the same time, these countries score at the very top of the “happiness index,” have very low crime and corruption rates, great educational systems, strong economies, well-supported arts, free health care, and egalitarian social policies. They have a wide variety of strong social institutions that provide community connections, opportunities for serving others, and other benefits that religion provides in the United States (Zuckerman, 2008).

From another cultural perspective, a significant strain in Eastern worldviews holds the search for meaning and purpose itself as irrelevant. For instance, Legalism, a Chinese philosophical tradition, rejected the notion that one should even try to find a purpose in life, and focused only on pragmatic knowledge. A more prominent and better-known Chinese belief system, Confucianism, holds that one should find meaning and purpose in everyday existence, focusing on being instead of doing, and not devote much effort to finding meaning and purpose outside of this everyday experience (Tu, 1985).

Such perspectives influenced western society as well. Informed by an Eastern-based philosophy, Alan Watts promoted the idea to western audiences that the sense of self is an illusion, that we are all part of a larger whole. He advocated abandoning the search for an individual meaning and purpose, which he perceived as a harmful western cultural construct (Watts, 1966). Another Eastern-informed perspective comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn. This prominent scholar and popularizer of meditation and mindfulness proposed relying on these practices to find your life purpose. Specifically, he discussed the importance of meditating on our personal vision and blueprint of what is most important in life in order to grasp our innermost values (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

The research on psychology and cognitive neuroscience illustrates the health and wellbeing benefits of gaining a personal sense of meaning and purpose, and the vital role of social bonds and community connections in gaining that sense. Certainly, some people can find meaning and purpose in life with little or no community ties, but research suggests such bonds are highly beneficial for most of those who are searching for a deep sense of life meaning. Believing in God and going to church is far from the only way to attain these qualities. One can gain them in non-religious venues that provide opportunities for community ties and social bonds.

Secular societies find means other than religion to satisfy people's needs for a deep sense of meaning and purpose. The case study of the Soviet Union demonstrates how one secularly-oriented society did so through club activities. It shows how people formed deep social bonds in state-sponsored community settings through club activities. Such bonds and community belonging helped Soviet citizens find a deep sense of meaning and purpose, and led to their support of the Soviet system, meeting the goals of the Soviet leadership and the personal needs and desires of Soviet citizens alike.

The article thus concludes that the Soviet authorities, at least in the late 1950s and 60s, created a system that shaped the decisions of Soviet citizens along the lines favored by the regime. In this sense, the state apparatus anticipated the suggestions made by Thaler and Sunstein (2008) about libertarian paternalism and choice architecture. The USSR's authorities created default options and shaped incentives in such a way as to result in outcomes desirable for the regime, and did so successfully.

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