

The Meaningful Living Project

What is the greatest need in these uncertain times? What are people's deepest yearnings?
What is your most cherished dream?

Yes, I know the popular answers: Good economy, good paying jobs, happiness, success and all things that people typically strive for.

But have you considered the unlikely answer that meaningful living might be what people really need?

I've been struggling for almost 30 years trying to understand and explain the meaning of life. Neither science nor philosophy is able to penetrate the true nature of meaning or plumb the depth of the human cry for its fulfillment.

All my research, clinical observations and life experiences could not dispel my self-doubts and feelings of inadequacy, because of the enormous complexity of human existence.

But here I am before you my readers, compelled by a sense of urgency. The needs are great and the harvest is ready. Woe to me if I do not do my part.

The primary reason is my age. Having devoted a big part of my life to developing the meaningful living project (M4L), I know that I will regret deeply if I do not share my findings before I am too old and too sick to write.

Simply put, M4L represents my effort to provide road signs for all those who feel discouraged, confused or stressed out in their quest for a more meaningful and rewarding life. It is also intended for all individuals who have the noble vision of making life better for all people.

M4L is built on my prior works: (1) *A Course on Meaningful Living* as a follow-up to the popular Alpha Program (<http://www.alphacanada.org/>), (2) Meaning-Centered Counselling & Therapy workshops around the world, (3) University courses on *The Positive Psychology of Meaning and Meaning Therapy*.

What I am presenting here is just a brief outline of the some section of the M4L project. I do hope that you can get a glimpse of M4L's potential to illuminate your path and make a difference in your life.

Why Meaning Matters

We are so conditioned by the American dream that most people believe that their first and primary objective in life is to achieve happiness and success through their own strengths.

However, during the recent economic downturn, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain the confidence that they can realize their cherished dream only if they put their minds to it. In times of discouragement and despair, a sense of meaning and purpose may be the best way to move forward.

How about those who have succeeded beyond their wildest expectations and already possess everything they have ever wanted? Yet, the view at the top of the ladder could be unsettling. What's next? Is this all there is to life?

What will sustain us in the face of retirement, aging, sickness and death? All the medical inventions and pharmaceutical discoveries cannot give us the will to live. Viktor Frankl and subsequent research have demonstrated that “the will to meaning” and reasons for living can steel our determination to live life to the fullest till the last breath.

So many people are sick and tired of their work. What enables us to do boring jobs and mundane chores cheerfully? The intrinsic motivation of calling and serving can reward us with a sense of satisfaction.

How do we combat the greed on Wall Street and the violence on Main Street? How do we replace the corrupt politicians with servant leaders? We cannot legislate morality, nor can we banish greed on pain of imprisonment. But we can instill in people the belief that the real strength of a person does not come from money and power, but comes from within the person – it is rooted in deep convictions, character strengths, a higher purpose and an unshakable faith.

What awakens people from their semi-slumbering state of wandering through life and wasting all their talents and potentials? If time is the most valuable commodity, then wasting a life time is a tragic loss punishable by a fearful death.

What is the best way to facilitate recovery from addiction, trauma, or mental illness? Active involvement in discovering and experiencing some meaning for living can go a long way in the difficult journey of healing.

When everything fails, the human capacity of meaning seeking can be the bridge that takes us from desperation to hope and a future goal.

There are just tons of research on the vital role of meaning and purpose in enhancing our well-being and resilience. Much of the research has been documented in my two volumes on *The Human Quest for Meaning*.

Unfortunately, most people are not fully aware that their life and well-being depend on discovering the hidden dimension of meaning.

Happiness is an easy sell and success is music to the ear, but meaning and purpose is what people really need in order to survive and flourish.

What is the INPM?

It stands for the International Network on Personal Meaning. In 1998, I founded the INPM at the Trinity Western University to advance the vision of Viktor Frankl of facilitating people's quest for meaning and purpose and the mission of positive psychology. But it is also intended to connect all the individuals and organizations interested in understanding human existence and improving the human condition through meaning.

We have organized International Meaning Conferences and Summer Institutes. We maintain two websites (www.meaning.ca and www.existentialpsychology.org) and a Positive Living Forum (<http://positiveliving.yuku.com>). We also publish the monthly *Positive Living Newsletter* and the *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy*. We are launching a new website (www.INPM.org) dedicated to the M4L Project.

Our members are also engaged in all sorts of research on meaning and its applications. Plans are underway to conduct systematic research on the broad impact of having a meaning-orientation on individuals and society.

In rare moments of exuberance, I would indulge myself in grandiose dreams. I envision a positive revolution, a meaning movement that will transform our society and make life better for all.

But most of the time, I have to struggle with the reality of how to keep INPM afloat financially and how to fulfill the mission of INPM on a shoestring budget.

With fear and trembling, I embark on the M4L project. I fully realize that this is an ambitious plan and a daunting task, but I believe that all INPM members will join me to fulfill the global vision of awakening people everywhere to pursue a greater dream and a higher purpose.

A Greater Dream

Everyone has a cherished dream. Happiness is to live one's dream life. Unfortunately, for many people, the American dream has turned into a nightmare of foreclosure, bankruptcy and unemployment.

Here is the good news. There is a better dream – a greater dream which is beyond the pursuit of personal happiness and success. It calls for living for a higher purpose beyond the self. It challenges you to live on a higher plane with a global vision.

Anyone who has ever impacted the world in significant ways has pursued a life goal that is greater than personal gains. The nobility of their mission, the tenacity of their purpose, and the depth of their compassion distinguish them from lesser mortals.

Anyone who has lived a truly rewarding life knows the joy and satisfaction of giving oneself fully to a worthy cause regardless of the costs. They would die smiling, with satisfaction and gratitude, knowing that they have not lived in vain.

To get a better sense of a greater dream, just read the life stories of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa or Billy Graham and many other giants in various fields of endeavors. One cannot help but be inspired by their sublime vision, selfless dedication and moral valor.

To all those who have made great contributions to humanity, happiness is found in giving rather than receiving, and meaning is found in risking everything for something worth dying for.

To live for a great dream calls for a new orientation towards life. Throughout his adult life, Viktor Frankl has emphasized that we should not ask what we can get from life, but rather what life demands of us.

John F. Kennedy, in his 1961 inaugural speech, trumpeted the same call to embrace social responsibility and self-sacrifice:

“And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.”

Here, on the threshold of a new decade of a new millennium, we are again calling all citizens of the world to pursue a greater dream that transcends personal and national interests, so that together we can build a better future for all people.

The essence of pursuing a greater dream is to switch from a self-centered happiness orientation to an other-centered meaning orientation.

According to Martin Seligman, father of the positive psychology movement, a full life consists of a pleasant life, an engaged life, and a meaningful life.

But our natural impulse to maximize pleasure and minimize pain can be a hindrance to living a meaningful life. In real life, we often face the tough choice between responsibility or pleasure, principle or expedience, sacrifice for a cause or selling out. The path towards meaning and purpose is paved with sweat and tears, struggles and hardships.

We are still conducting research to determine whether a meaning-orientation will increase meaningful living, spirituality, well-being, volunteerism, and resistance to temptations as compared to a hedonic orientation. The broad practical implications of a meaning-oriented life deserves more attention from researchers and practitioners.

But right now, we can start a personal experiment based on a within-subject design. If you are committed to participating in this M4L Project, complete Ed Diener's five-item *Satisfaction With Life Survey* (<http://web4health.info/en/answers/psy-swls-scale.htm>) and then compare your present results with the results on taking the same test at the end of this year.

Other psychological assessments will be made available on www.INPM.org for those who are interested. More importantly, keep a personal journal to track your journey of discovery and transformation.

An unexamined life is not worth living

The first exercise in this experiment is self-examination and life review in order to clarify what really matters most to you and what really drives you.

Do you want to live like a happy cow or a sad philosopher? Both Socrates and Aristotle have raised this kind of question.

The fundamental question is: do you want keep the status quo of business-as-usual or take the risk of living a more fulfilling and meaningful life?

In order to answer this question, you need to explore the 7 habits of meaningful living: Who am I? Where am I going? What is the purpose/mission of my life? What are my strengths and weaknesses? How can I find happiness? How can I find meaning and joy in the face of suffering and death? How can a make a significant contribution to this world?

Try to answer these questions the best you can. You can revise your answers as you progress on this meaning quest.

My Mission Statement

To cultivate a meaning-orientation towards life, you can begin by stating as clearly and specifically as possible regarding your Mission Statement, Current Life Goals, and the Sacrifices you are prepared to make. Here is my mission statement which may serve as a template:

My Mission in life is to glorify God and help others through teaching, preaching, writing and counselling. I want to heal the broken hearted, bring hope and joy to all people, and make disciples in all nations. I will wage a constant war against injustice, poverty and oppression anywhere so that all people can have the rights and freedom to pursue their dreams. My greatest happiness is to bring happiness to the suffering people.

My current life goals include: (1) Launching and promoting the Meaningful Living Project, (2) Reviving INPM so that it can fulfill its full potential, (3) Completing my book projects, (4) Practicing meaning therapy, (5) Finding an academic home for teaching and research.

Personal sacrifices: I am willing to toil day-in and day-out, and donate money to achieve my first two life goals. I am also prepared to be marginalized by some academic colleagues for Christian beliefs and be criticized by some Christian leaders for my attempt to integrate psychological science with the Christian faith. But I am willing to pay the price for a worthy cause.

Not bad for a 73-year old man and a cancer survivor to boot. I have no boring moment, no fear of death and dying, because I have found something worth living and dying for. I invite you to accompany me. The more the merrier. I dream of having a throng of one million strong to turn the world upside-down.

The Meaningful Moment Exercise

A meaning-orientation provides an over-arching philosophy of life and an all consuming motivation. Meaningful moments naturally flow from this new way of living.

The meaningful movement (MM) exercise is an important part of the project. It is simply the practice and habit of discovering MM so that an ever expanding stream of meaningful moments will eventually engulf and transform your life and the world around you.

Meaningful Moments (MM)

What is a MM? It is, by definition, a moment marked by special meaning and personal significance. Different from happy times, MMs can stir up negative emotions. Typically, an MM has at least two of the four characteristics:

1. **It is deeply felt** – It touches your emotions in a deep and lasting way. More than a fleeting feeling, it reaches your inner most being.
2. **It is deeply processed** – It involves deeper layers of meaning beyond the factual and superficial.
3. **It is enlightening** – It provides a solution to some puzzling problems or leads to some new discovery.
4. **It is transforming** – It enriches your life, changes your life's direction or restores a sense of purpose and passion to your life.

MMs abound in everyone's journey of life. An MM can be dramatic or ordinary, scary or funny. It can be a life-changing moment, such as spiritual conversion, getting married, or the birth of the first child in a family. An important MM may last a lifetime and drastically alter one's career and destiny.

The habit of reflecting on MMs can shape your character, define your life, foster inner goodness and deepen your spirituality. You may find out that MMs offer you something different, something deeper than the fleeting moments of positive feelings.

The Practice of MM

There are so many pathways to MMs. You can discover an MM after a long struggle, but you can also accidentally stumble upon an awe-inspiring scene.

It can be an Aha! moment, but it can also gradually emerge from looking back. It can come from taking a stroll in the park or watching children play.

Moments of making the right decisions are often meaningful. Each time you choose goodness in spite of fear, you experience an inner glow.

MMs can come from listening to Beethoven or meditating on a great book. It can come from lending a helping hand to someone in need or sharing your happiness with family and friends. The daily discipline of doing what is good and consistent with your Life Mission provides many MMs.

There is always a cost in anything worth doing. There is also a cost in the daily practice of MMs:

- It calls for a few minutes of self-reflection and listening to the whispers of solitude.
- It calls for cultivating mindful awareness and becoming attuned to the spiritual realm.
- It calls for an empathic ear and a compassionate heart.
- It calls for doing what life demands of you in each situation.

The very act of recording MMs can bring some many blessings – from remembering those who have been kind to us to renewing our efforts to do what is good and noble. MMs are the building blocks of meaningful living.

The PURE way to a Better Life

What is PURE?

PURE stands for Purpose, Understanding, Responsibility and Enjoyment. This is probably the simplest and best way to define the incredibly complex concept of MEANING of Life. It is also the most powerful strategy of planning and implementing a meaningful life.

A purpose-driven life is motivated by the desire to serve a higher purpose. Such a life has a clear focus and direction. It is marked by moral courage, self-sacrifice, integrity and inner goodness which will light up even the darkest corners of the world.

An awakened mind understands one's own identity and other people's needs. It is mindful of what is happening here-and-now and around the world. It looks beneath the surface and grasps the true nature of things. It transcends the limitations of the senses and biases. It is capable of making sense of the chaotic and absurd, and it sees beauty and goodness even on the dark side of human existence.

A responsible person has both the wisdom and courage to do what is good, and what is right. Such a person is accountable to one's own conscience, loved ones, society, environment and Creator. Responsibility is liberating rather than burdensome, because it sets us free from fears of failure and opposition, so that we can be free to do the things that really matter..

The fruit of joy comes from living with purpose, understanding and responsibility. It flows from inner goodness as well as doing good deeds. To truly enjoy life, one needs to live out meaning and virtue, according to one's highest purpose and best understanding. Authentic happiness is the result of becoming what we are meant to be.

The PURE Life

We start living a PURE life by practicing MMs. Instead of waiting for a God moment, or some kind of epiphany, we intentionally cultivate MMs on a daily basis. Exercises in MMs strengthen our moral fibers and sharpen our spiritual eyes.

PURE is a powerful strategy essential for living a vital and fulfilling life. Can you imagine a ship without a rudder or a train without an engine? Can you drive a car blindfolded? Can anyone escape the law of cause-and-effect?

Exercises in purpose: A purpose-driven life can be full of twists and turns, ups and downs. But at all times, we need to keep one eye on the goal and one eye on the ball. We also need to form the habit of asking whether it serves any good or useful purposes before making any major decisions. Such a simple practice can reduce a great deal of waste and save us from many avoidable troubles.

Exercises in understanding: It is more important to seek understanding than to be understood. Learning to listen with openness, humility, empathy, and acceptance will build relationships and reduce conflicts. Seeking wise counsel and learning practical wisdom can also enhance one's ability to understand and relate to others.

Exercises in responsibility: Doing the right thing day-in and day-out is the cornerstone of the PURE life. The mirror exercise can be helpful – when you look into the mirror, ask yourself: Can I see the beam in my own eyes? Can I live with myself for taking this action?

The rippling test is also helpful. Start by asking yourself how the full revelation and impact of your actions will affect your loved ones. Imagine how they will feel about you and react to your deed. Then, think about how your actions will affect the larger circle – your friends, co-workers, society, and future generations. Will your action help them or hurt them? Finally, ask whether your Master or Higher Power will approve of your actions.

Sometimes, claiming personal responsibility can be terrifying. It is like stripping off all the covers and standing naked before people and God. In the final analysis, all the excuses and

blaming will hinder rather than help us. As free agents endowed with the free will to make choices, we need to exercise self-determination and assume responsibility for our decisions and actions.

Exercises in spreading the joy: Emotions do not lie, people do. There is no point to put on a smile when you feel sad. Spreading the joy is not an act of self-display but an intentional way of sharing your authentic happiness. It is an invitation to join the community of love, and participate in the feast of celebration. It is to reach out and touch others with your contagious purpose-driven life.

An Action Plan

I have just outlined a blueprint for the Meaningful Living (M4L) Movement. It represents a summary of a meaning-centered mindset that calls for a switch from negatives to positives, from selfishness to a global vision, and from superficiality to spirituality. A detailed plan will be released on a new website (www.INPM.org) dedicated to the M4L Movement.

Meanwhile, I want to welcome you to join me in this global life-changing movement in the New Year. Many of you have asked me: How can I help? What can I do? Here is a preliminary action plan:

1. Make a commitment to participate in the M4L project on www.INPM.org. (Still under construction until official launching of the project.)
2. Subscribe to the Positive Living Newsletter on www.meaning.ca, which will provide practical guides to meaningful living in each issue.
3. Share your MMs with someone or via a social media network such as Facebook, Twitter or blogs.
4. Invite your family and friends to participate in the M4L project
5. Show your commitment by becoming a member of INPM on www.meaning.ca
6. Enroll in an online course on A Practical Guide for Meaningful Living. Watch for announcements on www.meaning.ca and www.INPM.org.
7. Become an active partner by providing financial and/or other kinds of tangible support to this project. (Please contact me directly.)

In sum, meaningful living is a way of life that brings out the best in us while healing the worst. The M4L project can become a grassroots movement when more and more

people embrace a purpose-driven life as a simple and effective way to transform lives and the world regardless of the circumstances.

Wishing you the best in 2011 as we work together to make life better for all. It will involve a lot of hard work and sacrifice, but don't get me wrong – this struggle may be your most rewarding journey, because happiness will come in through the back door when you devote your time and energy to a greater dream.

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