

Strength in Adversity

Larry K. Brendtro

I have found meaning in my life by helping others see the meaning in theirs.¹

~Viktor Frankl

The inscription above is prominently displayed in the Viktor Frankl Museum located in his former residence in the center of Vienna, Austria. Frankl's insight that helpers have the same need for purpose as those they help is particularly poignant. The Model of Leadership and Service includes purpose as an essential developmental need across the lifespan. See figure 1. Those helping others to thrive must meet these same needs in their own life and work. Further, leadership styles should match organizational mission. Staff cannot build in young people strengths which they themselves do not possess.



It is remarkable that three prominent schools of psychology emerged from a small group of colleagues in Vienna: Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, Alfred Adler's individual psychology, and Viktor Frankl's logotherapy (logo is the Greek word for meaning). Frankl distanced himself from his early fascination with Freud, criticizing psychoanalysis as mechanical and depersonalized. Likewise, he ended his time as Adler's assistant, challenging the Adlerian view that the core motive in humans is striving for superiority. In bold contrast, Frankl's logotherapy proposed striving to find meaning in one's life as the primary motivational force. Rejecting the view that humans were driven by sexual or dominance needs, Frankl saw the highest human purpose in contributing to others.

Frankl's classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, showed that those committed to some higher cause or service to others were most able to endure the Holocaust. He often quoted Nietzsche who said, *He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How*. Frankl used the Holocaust experience to show that forces beyond your control can take away anything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you respond to the situation. "After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is that being who entered those gas chambers upright with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips."²

Powerful, simple truths are found through a consilience of knowledge drawn from different disciplines.³ Elsewhere we have reviewed research and practice wisdom supporting the core developmental needs including the drive for purpose.⁴ We have also shown how these are linked to biosocial programs for attachment, achievement, autonomy, and altruism.⁵ Here we briefly introduce the reader to other scholars from various traditions who have observed that finding a sense of purpose through service to others is essential to a fulfilling life.

Frankl himself was strongly influenced by Russian author Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) who explored human suffering in great depth and called for responding with love:

*When the suffering of another creature causes you to feel pain, do not submit to the initial desire to flee from the suffering one, but on the contrary, come closer, as close as you can to him who suffers, and try to help him.*⁶

Figure 1.
The Model of Leadership and Service



This wisdom describes the work of pioneers in our field who looked beneath the pain-based behavior of persons in crisis and responded to their needs.

As philosopher Søren Kierkegaard stated, modern humanity is suffering from a sense of meaninglessness and striving for some purpose. William Damon of the Stanford Center for Adolescence defines purpose as the stable intention to accomplish something that is meaningful to the self and contributes to the world beyond self. Yet only one in five youth express a clear vision of where they want to go in life.

*The most pervasive problem of the day is a sense of emptiness that has ensnared many young people in long periods of drift during the time in their lives when they should be defining their aspirations and making progress toward their fulfillment.*⁷

Erik Erikson in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* described an essential task of childhood as developing a sense of ambition and purpose.⁸ "A person without purpose is like a ship without a rudder," said Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle.⁹ But, as Frankl noted, instead of helping persons adrift find their bearings, we convert an existential crisis into a supposed psychiatric disorder. The cure for purposelessness is provided in a simple prescription by psychiatrist David Viscott: The meaning in life is to find your gift.... *The purpose of life is to give it away.*¹⁰

Of course, not all purposes are beneficial as William Damon observes. “Only a positive prosocial purpose can provide the lasting inspiration, motivation, and resilience that is characteristic of a truly purposeful life.”¹¹ And while evil purposes may be motivating for a season, these are self-centered and eventually burn out. Ignoble purposes harm others and convey deceit and disrespect. Noble purposes support the well-being of both self and others.

Prominent business writers are among the first to predict a coming cultural shift from self-centered egoism to a life of purpose. Gabriel Grant observes that we may have the most materialistic and narcissistic culture that has ever existed. Yet, there is evidence that we may have hit an individualistic bottom and are heading in a new direction. Grant uses the new research tool of culturomics which taps the huge data base of Ngrams, Google’s massive library of digital publications from recent centuries to the present. Searching millions of books for the phrase “purpose in life” shows an unprecedented recent trend in the pursuit of this goal.¹² This shift appears to correlate with the rise of the millennial generation.¹³ And, purpose results in a more productive world. In his book *The Purpose Economy*, Aaron Hurst documents how successful enterprises are driven by workers’ desires for impact, personal growth, and a sense of community.¹⁴ Finally, in a world that knows far too much greed and selfishness, Adam Grant’s book *Give and Take* draws on the science of positive psychology to show why helping others in a genuine spirit of generosity transforms people and organizations.¹⁵

As we search for purpose in our lives, we are reclaiming enduring truths that are expressed in the cultural wisdom of indigenous peoples. While flying to Canada for a youth work conference, I noticed that the passenger across the aisle was reading a brochure from the same event we were both travelling to attend. Asking to join him, I learned that he was Eddie Melrose, a Cree elder from Alberta, Canada. As we spoke, this elder shared a powerful story from his own cultural experience:

My grandfather was very old, so I decided to see what I might learn from this wise relative. “Grandfather, what is the purpose of life?” I asked. He pondered for a time and then responded. “Children are the purpose of life. We were once young and someone cared for us. And now it is our time to care.”

(Endnotes)

- 1 Displayed in the Viktor Frankl Museum, Vienna, Austria.
- 2 Frankl, V. (1959, 2006). *Man’s search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, p. xii.
- 3 The term consilience was first used by 19th Century British philosopher of science, William Whewell, to extract powerful truths shrouded in a mass of knowledge from different disciplines. The concept was revived by Harvard socio-biologist E. O. Wilson. For a recent discussion, see Wilson, E. O. (1998). *Consilience: The unity of knowledge*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- 4 CF Learning. (2016). *1000 fires burning: Reclaiming youth at risk*. Lennox, SD: CF Learning.
- 5 Brendtro, L., & Mitchell, M. (2015). *Deep brain learning: Evidence-based essentials in education, treatment, and youth development*. Albion, MI: Starr Commonwealth.
- 6 Tolstoy, L. (1910, 1967). *A calendar of wisdom*. New York, NY: Scribner, p. 215.
- 7 Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping our children find their calling in life*. New York, NY: Free Press, p. xii.
- 8 Erikson, E. (1994). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York, NY: Norton.
- 9 Thomas Carlyle cited in Damon op. cit., p. 124.
- 10 Viscott, D. (1993). *Finding your strength in difficult times: A book of meditations*. Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books, p. 87.
- 11 Damon, op. cit., p. 40.
- 12 Grant, G. (2015). Exploring the possibility of an age of purpose. *Social Science Research Network*. http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2618863
- 13 Sheahan, P. (2005). *Generation Y: Thriving and surviving with generation Y at work*. Prahan, Australia: Hardie Grant Books.
- 14 Hurst, A. (2014). *The purpose economy*. Boise, ID: Elevate.
- 15 Grant, A. (2013). *Give and take: Why helping others drives our success*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.