

The meaning inventory

To find meaning in the present, it's worthwhile to look at the past. Think back over your life. What has given you the deepest sense of meaning? What has seemed really worthwhile to you? There may be many items on the list, there may be few. Some items may have given you a profound sense of meaning, others may have given you a flicker. Some may have lasted for years or decades, others for a moment.

Don't distinguish between them. Brainstorm. If anything gave you an ounce of meaning for an instant at any time in your life, write it down.

Note that we are after a sense of *meaningfulness*. This does not necessarily mean a sense of *enjoyment*. Many of the experiences that give us a sense of meaning are painful, or difficult, or involve loss.

Put the first dozen here; then keep going using additional paper.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

Leave your list lying around for a few days. The act of doing the exercise will trigger other ideas, other memories. Write them down as they occur to you.

Here are some experiences that others have found meaningful. See if they spark any further ideas for you.

Giving birth	Writing poetry
Reading philosophy	Creating art
Raising my daughter	Meditating
Funding my niece through university	Discovering I could live alone
Sponsoring a child in Nepal	Letting go of my grief
Attending my mosque	Playing music
Walking in the forest	Attending Narcotics Anonymous
Graduating	Returning to my family
Working at the food bank	Caring for my ill father
Supervising students	Fishing
Getting through my first depression	Teaching my son to read
Being married	Learning to give massages
Building my home	Gardening
Hosting the family at Christmas	Peacekeeping duty in the Balkans
Traveling in Europe	Getting a story published
Working on my genealogy	Going on a monastic retreat
Leading the Scout troop	Overcoming my fear

There are things on this list you may have tried, and they did not give you a sense of meaning. Others you cannot imagine would ever give you such a sense. Everyone's experience of meaning is different. They are only illustrations to help you explore your own reactions. If many of the items on the list seem rather grand compared to your own experiences (peacekeeping duty, for example), don't let this stop you. Write down the experiences that have been meaningful to you. Be as specific as you can.

Before moving on, take a look at what you have written. Are there any common themes in your list? Do a lot of them involve other people? Creative work? Solitude? Nature? Personal growth? What are some of the similarities you see?

Perhaps these themes suggest where meaning is to be found for you. Perhaps they indicate where you have found it in the past but don't any longer. Perhaps you can see areas of your life left unexplored. What does this exercise suggest to you about finding meaning in the future?

Problems with your mood may cause you to focus on how many of these things are no longer available to you. Perhaps athletic competition in your teen years gave you a deep sense of meaning, and you are no longer able to play that sport. Perhaps a relationship gave you that sense of meaning, and that relationship is now ended. Perhaps a role, such as motherhood, gave you that sense of meaning, and your children are now grown. Perhaps a religious faith gave you that sense, and you now no longer believe.

Why not indulge that part of your mind for a moment? Finish this sentence:

“The sense of meaning I got from the first thing on that list is no longer available to me because....

”

There. If you repeat that sentence to yourself long enough, magic may occur. The sentence, and the belief behind it, may become transparent. You will see beyond it, and perceive how that desire, or goal, or path might still be a part of your life. You are no longer a teen athlete, but could take a role as a coach. Your children are grown, but the local neonatal ward is looking for volunteers. Your faith no longer sustains you, but there is that other faith you have been meaning to look at.

Does this exercise point you toward a positive course of action? If so, what is it? How could you take the first step toward it?
