

Separating from cultural expectations

Forget, for a moment, everything that your experience has shown you to be meaningful in your life. Become an alien from outer space. You know nothing about humans or what it is to lead a meaningful human life. Look closely at the culture. Watch television, go to movies, read magazines, look at advertising, listen to political speeches. What does the culture tell you is meaningful? If you wanted to feel fulfilled, what does your culture tell you to do, or think, or feel, or believe? Come up with a few ideas before moving on.

Now: You are also a member of a subculture. Perhaps you are Asian-American. Perhaps you are Buddhist. Perhaps you are a computer programmer. A skateboarder. A corporate executive. A gay man or a lesbian. A city-dweller. An environmentalist. A political party member. A country club member. A single parent. Which subculture(s) do you belong to?

As an alien, you visit this subculture. You read its magazines, attend its meetings, meet its members. What does your subculture tell you is the meaningful life, or the road to happiness and fulfillment?

Think of a scale of meaningfulness from 0 to 100, where 0 is “completely meaningless” and 100 is “the most meaningful thing in your life.” From *your own personal experience*, rate each of the ideas above that your culture and your subculture has about the meaningful life. For example, if your culture says that buying lots of possessions is the way to fulfillment, and you’ve found this to be absolutely correct, rate it 100. If you’ve found it to be absolutely false, rate it 0. Half and half: 50.

Notice anything? Many people discover that they are surrounded by ideas from their culture and their subculture about what makes for the meaningful life – and that most of these ideas don't really seem to be true. Perhaps a few of them are helpful, or believable, or, yes, meaningful. But there are a lot of false messages getting delivered.

The problem is this. When you live inside a culture, the messages of that culture are all around you, like a kind of soup. It's hard to escape them. After a while you stop seeing or hearing the messages. They become a natural part of your reality. You hear several hundred times a day that buying something will lift your mood, so eventually you come to believe it – perhaps without even knowing that you believe it. You hear that gathering wealth, or obtaining a promotion, or taking an exotic holiday, or cleaning the house, or having vast amounts of sex are very fulfilling ways of living a life, and you hear them so often that they couldn't possibly be wrong. Could they? And if they're right for other people, then they must be right for you. Mustn't they?

Psychologists use the term *separation/individuation* to describe the process of questioning the values and ideas of your family to decide which ones suit you. The idea is that as we mature we examine our ways of understanding the world and shift from a set of beliefs that we hold "*because mom and dad think so*" to a set that we believe *because we think so*.

Separation/individuation is used almost exclusively to describe a shift that takes place in our relationship with our family. It is less often used to describe a process of re-evaluating the values of the larger culture. The concept is similar, however, and arguably just as important. Perhaps if we lived in a society designed exclusively with the goal of promoting good mental health, we could rely on its values and ideas about the "good life." But we don't.

What are some of the distorted messages we might be receiving, and what are the motivations behind them? In a consumer culture, one of the primary motives for communicating is to get us to buy something. We receive a great many messages telling us that the way to happiness, to fulfillment, and to virtue is to purchase a product of some type. This car will get you love, this suit will get you success, this deodorant will get you social approval. Here's what you should wear, here's how you should look, here's how much you should weigh, here's what should be in your house, and here's where you can buy it.

The difficulty is that the message isn't based on research demonstrating that the car really does produce romance; it's based on the desire for your money. Many of us spend much of our lives obeying these messages only to find that the promised pot of meaning or happiness does not, after all, lie at the end of the rainbow. This can be confusing. Surely it can't be that the messages you've been receiving are incorrect. It must be that there's something the matter with *you*.

Well, maybe there isn't. Maybe one cause of difficulty for you is that you have been obedient, have listened well to the messages of your culture, and have done what you were told. You bought more things than you could really afford and found yourself in financial trouble. You ate fast food and found yourself malnourished. You tried to get the magazine-cover body and didn't get the magazine-cover smile that was supposed to go with it. You ran after the corporate success and weren't happy when you reached it. And under it all, the feared question built up: *"What's the point of all this?"* Answer: Perhaps none. But perhaps there *is* a point, if you look elsewhere for it.

Where is the point to be found? Chances are, it's already inside you. Hard to find. But perhaps if you cultivate your skepticism about the messages from outside, the ones that tell you where the point is *supposed* to come from, it'll become easier to listen to the messages coming from *inside*.

Are there particular messages from your culture or subculture about what you should be doing, or buying, or how you should look, that you need to be particularly skeptical about? Which are the ones that you have found seductive but ultimately unfulfilling?

What could you do to stop yourself from automatically obeying these messages in the future? What could you tell yourself as a reminder that they don't point the way toward happiness?

What is ONE THING that you have found helpful, useful, or meaningful (regardless of whether it agrees with what you have been told by others)?
