

VIRGINIA WOOLF

- What is the meaning of life?
- The great revelation had never come.
- Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark . . .

JOHN STUART MILL

- It is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied . . .
- Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness;
- on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even some art or pursuit followed not as a means but as an ideal end.
 - Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.

AND

- A human being is a part of the whole called by us the universe, a part limited in time and space. Yet we experience ourselves — our thoughts and feelings — as separate from the rest. This is a kind of optical delusion of consciousness.
- This delusion is like a prison, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.
- Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

■ --Albert Einstein



July 4, 1776

We hold these truths to be self-evident
that all men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator
with certain unalienable rights,
that among these are

Life, Liberty
and the pursuit of
Happiness

Ignite Alabama

SHINECAST®

Birmingham Shines



HAPPINESS MACHINE



RED PILL OR BLUE PILL?



MEANING INSTEAD OF HAPPINESS?

- Life has no objective, built-in meaning.
- Human life is complex and constantly changing.
- It can be seen from many *contradictory* viewpoints.
- Each viewpoint has a specific cultural/political context and
- Each viewpoint relies on a distinct set of unprovable basic assumptions.

**SO: NO ONE HAS A GOD'S EYE VIEW
“NO ONE HAS ALL THE ANSWERS”**



BUT HUMANS **NEED** MEANING

- Viktor Frankl's observations during the Shoah confirm Nietzsche's maxim:
- "If we have our own why in life, we shall get along with almost any how."
- In other words: Life always includes trauma, fear, vulnerability, grief, and loss. And we can bear these only if we know WHY we ought to bother.
- To be or not to be—for *what* do we bear the slings and arrows of outrageous life traumas?

FOUR PILLARS OF MEANING

PER EMILY ESFAHANI SMITH

- There are **four ways** to find (construct) a sense of meaning in one's life.
- (1) Belonging: fulfilling basic need for connection
- (2) Purpose: finding meaning through dedication to the cause of helping/saving others
- (3) Storytelling: building *useful stories* from the raw material of uncountable fleeting experiences.
- (4) Transcendence: having an experience where the self threatened by death is seen to be delusory.

(1) BELONGING

A sense of belonging—being connected with other humans—is **MOST** critical to our sense of well-being, happiness, and sense of meaning.

Belonging is strengthened by (A) close relationships in community and (B) high quality interactions.

What these two have in common is focusing on others, opening our hearts to them.

Seeing one another in a **human-human way**, not as objects, obstacles or tools.

CONNECTED IN COMMUNITY

A. Two examples of deriving meaning from a sense of belonging in **close relationships** in community:

Tangier Island

traditional, isolated, place-based; sense of home

Society for Creative Anachronism

contemporary, open, enthusiasm-based; sense of finding one's tribe; people who would miss you

TANGIER ISLAND



UUF_{CM}?



THE HUMAN NEED FOR CONNECTION

People are more likely to commit suicide where individualism is highly valued, such that people feel free from the constraints— but also the warmth—of close community.

Protestant Christians, well-educated people (who leave home for work), and unmarried people: at greater risk.

Babies isolated from germs in an orphanage do FAR worse than babies cared for in a lively prison nursery.

(B) HIGH QUALITY INTERACTIONS

Positive, short-term interactions that can involve passing strangers, clerks, colleagues, friends, partners or family.

Even a passing moment where each person is tuned into the other and reciprocates positive regard, respect, care.

Such interactions are critical to our finding meaning in our relationships with others, but do not depend on a specific sense of stable community.



CONCLUSION: BELONGING IS AN INDISPENSABLE SOURCE OF MEANING

Meaning is not something we just create within and for ourselves through a solitary quest, philosophical or otherwise.

Meaning “largely lies in others;” we create it by reaching out and focusing beyond ourselves.

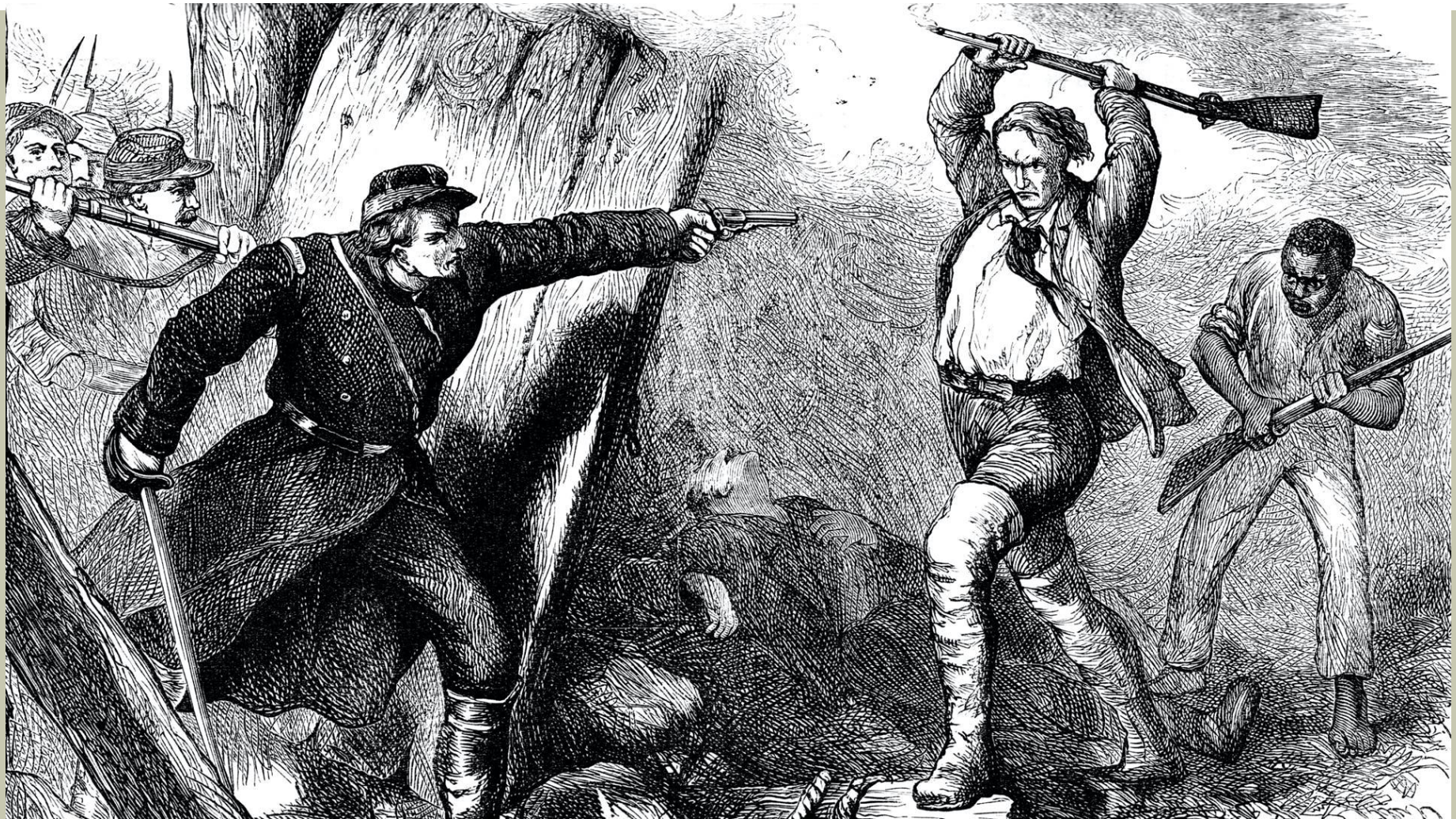
(2) PURPOSE

A stable and far-reaching goal—a goal toward which we are always working. An organizing principle for our lives.

Involves a contribution to the world, making a difference by contributing to something larger than oneself.

JOHN BROWN (1800-1859)

WILLING NOT ONLY TO DIE, BUT ALSO TO KILL
PURPOSE: ELIMINATION OF SLAVERY



FINDING PURPOSE

- 1. Those with a sense of purpose believe that their lives are more meaningful and more satisfying.**
- 2. “We are capable of something unique, each one of us, but it takes time to find out what that is.” (Manjari Sharma)**
- 3. Raising children, on average, decreases happiness and yet increases a sense of meaning. It can be very rewarding to put aside narrow self-interest.**

PURPOSE AT WORK

Two factors that cause people to see their work as meaningful:

(1) Using their distinct talents on the job and (2) seeing their work as a way to help others.

People who rate their work as meaningful include teachers, clergy, therapists, and some types of physicians.

CONCLUSION ON PURPOSE

A janitor at NASA told JFK: “I am helping to put a man on the moon.”

“No matter what occupies our days, when we frame our tasks as opportunities to help others, our lives and our work feel more significant . . .

Everyone one of us has the capacity to help some others in some ways – and thereby find purpose and meaning.” (Emily Esfahani Smith)

(3) STORYTELLING

Life is not what you lived, but rather what you remember and how you remember it so as to tell the story.—G.G. Marquez

Stories are the way humans create meaning by linking selected memories to create beginnings, middles, and ends.

They help create a stable sense of self and transmit culturally specific values. So they create both identity and meaning.

HUMAN = STORY-TELLER

Dawn Daniels



SACRED STORIES AS SOURCES OF MEANING

It is not a matter of literal/historical truth or falsity. The best way to evaluate a symbolic story is to consider what happens when we try to live according to it.

One story still dominant today is a social Darwinism, a pseudo-scientific rerun of the puritan ethic. This story justifies the growing wealth and power of a privileged elite—they are the elect, they are the most fit, they are deserving. The poor are undeserving “losers.”

Our stories must change in the interest of justice—and so that we can better respond to economic and ecological challenges.

THE STORY OF OUR LIVES

There is also the personal story of who we are deep down, where we come from, and what it all means.

People who believe their lives are meaningful tend to tell stories with themes of **growth, communion, agency, and redemption.**

Redemption stories, for example: a positive event resulting from a negative event, thereby giving suffering some meaning.

OUR STORY-CHOICES MATTER

Therapy where clients rewrite their personal stories is just as effective as antidepressants or CBT.

People actually become more effective at helpful behavior when first asked to tell a story in which they represent themselves as benefiting others.

Counterfactual storytelling:

What would my life be like if UUFCM were not here?

What would my life be like if my partner had not died?

Such stories most fully engage the sense-making process.

(4) TRANSCENDENCE: GOING BEYOND THE SELF THREATENED BY DEATH



**Walt Whitman
1819-1892**

**Breaking out of
Einstein's "optical
delusion" about who
we are**

SONG OF MYSELF

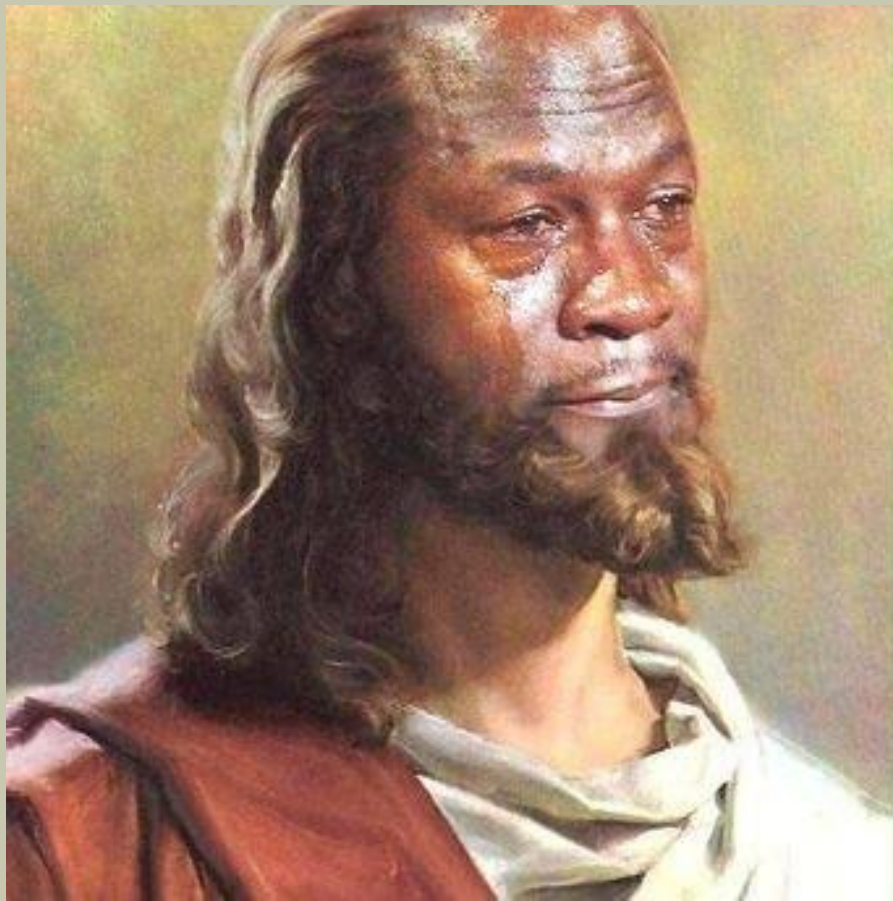
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
. . . And there will never be any more perfection than there is now,

Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,
I resist any thing better than my own diversity.
A mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me.
I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid,
Do you see O my brothers and sisters?

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

JESUS



**I am the All, and the All
has gone out from me
and the All has come
back to me.**

**Cleave the wood: I am
there; lift the stone and
thou shalt find me there!"**

**Jesus in *The Gospel of
Thomas*, vs. 77**

JANEEN DELANEY

ON DRUGS (AND BARBER'S ADAGIO FOR STRINGS)

- Michigan woman from a Christian household loses all hope or meaning after a diagnosis of terminal leukemia in 2005.
- But when she passed away in 2015, she had found complete peace and fearlessness in the face of death.
- This was via guided experiences with psilocybin at Johns Hopkins University. (Psilocybin derives from psychedelic mushrooms.)



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JANEEN DELANEY SAID . . .

- If you hold the view that everything ends with the body's death, with no meaning or hope, it is a dismal prospect.
- But when you have a sense of the interconnectedness of all things and a stunning appreciation of life, then--whether you believe in an afterlife or not--you recognize the astounding mystery of what it is to live and to be aware.
- Sitting on my back porch watching my plants grow, everything my eyes fall upon, that's the universe. You are the universe, you are part of the greater whole.

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

When our lives utterly fall apart, as though in a terrible earthquake, *we will never be the same.*

Rabbi Harold Kushner: “I became a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor and counselor, because of [my son] Aaron’s life and death.”

He is NOT grateful for his son’s death. But he appreciates— and benefits others—through the spiritual and emotional growth that he experienced after that death.

**AND SO
LIKE VIKTOR FRANKL, KUSHNER, DELANEY, ETC.**

**Even in the face of devastation,
we can rebuild meaning
through belonging,
purpose,
story-telling, and—maybe —
transcending our ordinary sense of self.**

MOSTLY BASED ON
THE POWER OF MEANING
BY EMILY ESFAHANI SMITH

And **her** work is
based on published,
refereed social
science research!



A STORY OF COMMUNITY WITH PURPOSE

Americans have called upon us to marshal the forces of decency, the forces of fairness, to marshal the forces of **science** and the forces of hope in the great battles of our time:

The battle to control the virus. The battle to build prosperity. The battle to secure your family's health care. The battle to achieve racial justice and root out systemic racism in this country.

President-Elect Joe Biden

AMEN

