

# The Three Stages of Purpose

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Your purpose.  
Your reason for being.  
Your reason for getting up in the morning.

You may not have pondered the first two items much, but most of us have occasionally wondered about our reason for getting up in the morning.



## What is purpose?

Purpose is what inspires us to get up in the morning to do what we do. Purpose is determined largely by our values and cares. Purpose is an expression of our deepest motivations. It is the core around which we orient our time and our life direction. It is the way the meaning of our lives is worked out in daily experiences.

We are driven by internal purpose, even if it is unexamined. We have a purpose no matter what our age or what our economic or social status. It is the reason we were born, and it is, ultimately, what gets us out of bed in the morning. The formation of personal purpose is complex and, well, personal.

## What is the power of purpose?

What determines the power of purpose is the worthiness of its aim. Purpose requires an aim outside ourselves. Only when our focus is outside ourselves is meaning achieved.

Mattering matters. At our core we need to matter. Purpose is fundamental to life. Like health and money, it is essential to our longevity and happiness. Naming and claiming our purpose helps us satisfy a fundamental need that we are living a life that we deem to be a worthy one.

With purpose, each of us is an experiment of one. We are born with an innate desire to contribute to life. We want to leave our footprints—our unique mark on the world. We can learn from, but not adopt, the purpose of another person. We must uncover, discover, and rediscover our own.

## What is the power of choice?

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who spent three years during World War II living in horrific circumstances in three of the worst Nazi concentration camps.

While in the camps, Frankl realized he had one single freedom left. He had the power to choose his response to the horror around him. And so he chose to make a difference. He chose to get up every day and give others a kind word, a crust of bread, hope. He imagined his wife, Tilly, and the prospect of being with her again. He imagined finishing the book that he had been writing up to the very day he was imprisoned. He wrote it over and over in his mind and on tiny scraps of paper that he hid. He imagined himself teaching students after the war about the lessons he had learned.

Frankl survived but his family did not. Leaving the camp weighing 87 pounds, he went back to Vienna to heal. When he recovered, he went on to chronicle his experiences and the insights he had drawn from them. In nine days he wrote his classic book, “Man’s Search for Meaning,” which has sold more than 12 million copies in over 20 languages.

“A human being is a deciding being,” he wrote. “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

In that space lays the power of choice. Our choices are very real and potentially life saving or life changing. Frankl wrote, “One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment, which demands fulfillment.”

That concrete assignment is a choice to serve. It’s a spiritual call to fulfill our purpose on earth. As our purpose evolves over our lifetime—it is uncovered, discovered, and rediscovered—it gives our lives dignity and meaning. We are not burdened by purpose as a sense of duty or moral obligation. We care to make a difference because we recognize that it is our reason for being here.

Throughout history, humans have sought to make sense of their lives, searching for meaning through prayer, retreat, art, music, nature, volunteering and multiple other ways. Traditionally, purpose was connected with the spiritual aspect of our lives. Healers, elders, priests, and shamans were the guides who helped us make sense of our world and our place in it.

Now science is validating what Frankl discovered—that purpose is fundamental to life. Consider the role purpose plays in helping ailments ranging from pain and depression to Alzheimers and other diseases. Though the purpose effect remains largely shrouded in mystery, researchers now attribute some aspects to active mechanisms in the brain that influence the immune response and the will to live.

When it comes to life’s inevitable breakdowns, purpose can provide breakthroughs. Purpose, like Viktor Frankl wrote, gives us the will to live—a reason to get up in the morning—regardless of our circumstances. Without purpose we can die. With purpose, we can live with choice, dignity and meaning. Purpose is the one thing that cannot be taken from us. It enables us to do amazing things.

### **What stage of purpose are you in?**

Many of us have come to acknowledge publically what we privately knew all along: that surviving adolescence and early adulthood did not ensure a tranquil, jolt-free passage through the rest of our lives.

We change; our priorities shift; confidence grows, dissolves into doubt, returns; relationships ebb and flow and change; work motivators evolve and take on new meaning—all forming progressive stages.

Purpose is not discovered once and then we are done with it. It is reexamined at various points throughout our life, typically during crises and major life transitions. It progresses in stages. Progressive means that things get clearer as they evolve.

How might we harness the power of purpose to live more conscious lives and, perhaps, to even recast the most challenging situations in which we find ourselves?

There are three stages of purpose on our journey through life. What stage of purpose are you in?

### **Stage 1: Uncovering—“It’s about me.”**

Purpose is perceived as coming from others, and is directed toward ourselves.

This stage begins with our birth, our family of origin, and our early experiences, challenges and lessons learned. It is the stage that shapes us and provides us with our initial values and cares. Our greatest crises and challenges likely formed our purpose.

During this stage we seek to uncover our authentic path in life. Not just any path will do. Our authentic path is not simply one that someone will pay us to occupy (like a job or a career), nor a task we happen to have the talent to perform (like an art or a craft), nor a social role (like a parent or grandparent) in which other people will embrace us. It’s got to be our own path, one in keeping with our gifts, passions and values.

We uncover our unique path by experiencing the world. We gain a sense of what is possible as well as purposeful, and we cultivate a relationship with the visible realms as much as with the hidden.

We seek to uncover the one life we can call our own. As Joseph Campbell wrote, “The differentiations of sex, age, and occupation are not essential to our character, but mere costumes which we wear for a time on the stage of the world. The image of a person within is not to be confounded with the garments. . . . Yet such designations do not tell what it is to be a person, they denote only the accident of geography, birth date and income. What is the core of us? What is the basic character of our being?”

### **Stage 2: Discovering—“It’s about us.”**

Purpose is perceived as residing outside ourselves and is directed toward the needs of others.

This stage begins when we choose to make a difference in the lives of others. For most, this takes place in our current family role or work. But, this stage requires us to let go of our self-absorption and allow ourselves to be used for a larger purpose. We might not know what our larger purpose is. However, we have decided to make a small difference, one person at a time, in the lives of others. This stage gives us glimpses of an authentic life.

When we choose to make a difference in the lives of others, we begin to perceive our own lives differently, almost immediately. The right people seem to show up and the right situations seem to present themselves as opportunities to serve others. We experience the true joy in the purpose moments of life. We experience challenges that make us doubt ourselves and question our capacity. But, we wake up with a clear reason to get up in the morning.

As George Bernard Shaw wrote, "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized as a mighty one. . .the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself into making you happy."

### **Stage 3: Rediscovering—"It's about all of us."**

Purpose is perceived as coming through the self and used for the sake of all others.

This is commonly seen as a spiritual calling. We look back and see how all the stages of our lives are connected to our life today. It is the stage where our purpose becomes so clear that we can say it in a simple sentence. It's a time of larger meaning. We give and we get. What we give comes back to us exponentially. We perceive ourselves as ordinary people with extra-ordinary lives.

We may not build libraries but we rediscover a larger purpose in reading to a child. We may not feed the homeless, but we nourish others by listening or giving a kind word. We may not start a non-profit organization but we volunteer for something we care deeply about. We perceive how we can make a difference every day and touch the lives of everyone we meet.

The question during this stage is not what is the meaning of life, but what is life asking of us? And the answer must be chosen by each of us every day in our own way. Meaning is rediscovered in the day-to-day purpose moments when courage and care trump convenience.

Purpose keeps us present. When we rediscover the purpose moments, we tap into an endless supply of energy. Throughout life there is meaning available to us, and that life retains its meaning under any condition and until its final moment.