



FINDING YOUR PLACE IN LIFE

Words by Philipp Kristian G Diekhöner

THE DRIVE to understand and seek personal purpose and existential meaning is such a fundamental endeavour that it is shared by the whole of mankind. Contrary to common perception, it is not an entitlement privy to the educated, but a challenge relevant to every human being. I have experienced many instances in which the pursuit of one's calling is dismissed as the favourite pastime of a bored, over-privileged intellectual elite displaying little or no interest in earning a living. This perception is incorrect and dangerous, for it makes the assumption that self-development is discretionary, rather than an essential pillar of individual existence.

Having spent a year in Singapore so far, I've had the chance to speak with an eclectic selection of people. Of the many interesting conversations, quite a few eventually touched on existential topics, such as the search for happiness and self-awareness. Most of them followed the exact, same structure—how Singapore is a prosperous yet unhappy nation, how there is a lack of purpose in society and how other cultures are more accommodating of the search for individual fulfillment. Put simply, people agree their country has proven an excellent student of capitalism, but a spectacular failure in the art of living.

Perhaps, more alarmingly, the situation appears to have deteriorated. With social media consumption skyrocketing over the past few years, much of classic literature on personal development is being replaced by shallower intellectual stimuli. Attaining existential awareness is somewhat harder when you prefer to spend most of your day glued to a smartphone screen than to occasionally retreat with a good book.

To my dismay, much of the tinpot philosophy circulating on social media uses the concepts of purpose and success interchangeably, and displays a habit of compacting superficial advice into clumsy, overly simplistic lists of principles for living a worthwhile life. Dismissing their validity requires no elaborate argument—simple logic dictates that, as *individuals*, each of us must have an *individual* path to self-development. Popular media needs to stop treating the discovery of personal purpose as a tangible, explicit skill that is easily passed on—like, say, the ability to pitch a tent. **[Fig. 1]**

Indeed, the meaning of life is revealed through a journey towards self-discovery, beginning with an elaborate understanding of one's origins—a difficult challenge for the people of a young nation like Singapore. Like winds on a stormy day, life pushes the more feebly rooted of us vigorously around and motivates escapism. The rising popularity of weekend retreats for stressed-out urbanites is a testimony to the "uprootedness" of 21st century metropolitan lifestyles. On a recent trip to the Maldives, I found myself surrounded by fellow city-dwellers celebrating their break from reality. Besides the immaculate beaches, what fascinated me was the stark contrast between my fellow guests' indulgence in a paradise fantasy and the simple, austere lifestyle of the Maldivian staff.

When asked to share their dreams and their life plans, some of the younger resort workers simply responded that all they wanted was to grow old where they had grown up. While it might seem laughable to some, the gravitas inherent in this answer implied a fundamental contentment with life—that which we all seek, be it in our dreams or the reality of our everyday existence. Rootedness, a sense of

home and clear life goals are great foundations for a purposeful existence—and a difficult challenge to surmount in an age of perpetual distractions.

As Oscar Wilde famously observed, "the aim of life is self-development. To realise one's nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for". Everyone seeking purpose has to listen first to themselves, find the essence of their nature and translate it into principles to live by. Moreover, the individual faces an added challenge of reconciling his or her life philosophy with societal norms to attain acceptance, without which we would be doomed to a life of solitude. Hermann Hesse accurately expressed this tension, observing how everyone is challenged to find his or her place on a continuum of individualism and social conformity. To claim a spot in which we are comfortable, it is paramount we focus, differentiating between the discretionary and what truly matters to us.

In keeping with Oscar Wilde, it helps to approach this as intuitively as possible. Principally, humans are good by nature, and intuition is a great avenue for this inherent goodness to surface in our ordinary existence. Being good carries unique meaning for every individual and seems to be a key enabler of a purposeful, individual lifestyle. In plain speak, we can simplify purpose as follows: our aim in life is to be good by being ourselves. But who should judge our goodness—is it society's responsibility?

Arguably, most parents would still prefer that their child become a doctor, a lawyer or a banker over pursuing a career path that most adequately befits their interests and human qualities—framing prosperity and status as capstones of a fulfilled existence. Ironically, social acceptance is only marginally governed by goodness—labels and financial security continue to take precedence. If purpose is a safe avenue to happiness and contentment, it explains why "success" by conventional gauges doesn't necessarily coincide with it.

In essence, doing well and doing good are fundamentally different concepts. We must remember that achievement and fulfillment rarely co-exist without us making the effort to connect them in the context of our life. Our struggle for happiness might be overcome if we invest our energy in both self-development and achievement by common definition, finding our suitable place on a continuum of individual expression and social conformity—and dedicating a fair share of our mind to each. Understanding our purpose counterweights society's tendency to mould us in accordance with public expectations. It balances our desire for intellectual freedom with our need for belonging, and our individualism with our inherent conditioning to seek social recognition—making it a potent catalytic force leading the way to happiness. ■

1. Dustin Hoffman in a scene from *The Graduate*, in which his parents force him to put on diving gear and demonstrate its use in the pool.