

What Is This Life Asking of Me?

Finding meaning, making room for joy, and belonging to a life that is still unfolding

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Sometimes the question arrives after something changes. The children need us differently. Work that once gave the week its shape no longer does. Someone we love dies, and the future we were moving toward becomes a future we cannot have. At other times, very little has changed from the outside. We are doing what we have always done, perhaps doing it well, when we notice that the old answers no longer reach quite far enough.

We may still love the people in our lives. There may be things we are proud of, commitments we would choose again. Yet a question keeps returning in small, inconvenient moments: *What am I giving my life to? Is there room here for the person I am becoming?*

These questions can be difficult to admit. They can sound ungrateful, disloyal, or unnecessarily dramatic. We may tell ourselves that other people have real problems, that we should appreciate what we have and get on with the day. Sometimes getting on with the day is exactly what is needed. But a question that continues to return may deserve company before it is dismissed.

“What is this life asking of me?” can begin as a way of listening. It need not mean that life has a hidden assignment we are failing to discover. It might mean looking more closely at this particular season: the people who matter, the capacities we have, the losses we carry, the conditions we are living within, and whatever still draws our interest. An answer may begin with something much smaller than a life purpose.

When getting better leaves a larger question

Much of psychological help understandably begins with suffering. We want the worry to ease, the arguments to become less destructive, the shame to loosen its hold. Relief matters. Someone who has been struggling to sleep or get through a workday does not need to be told that symptom relief is a shallow ambition.

And sometimes, as there is a little more room, another question becomes possible: *What would I like this room to be for?* Being less afraid may make it easier to speak, but it does not decide what we want to say. Becoming better at setting limits may protect time without telling us what deserves our attention. We can become skilled at managing ourselves and still feel uncertain about living.

Frank Tallis, in *The Act of Living*, returns psychotherapy to this broader conversation. Its traditions have something to offer questions about identity, relationship and how to live, as well as the treatment of distress. His perspective invites us to take the ordinary difficulties of being human seriously without treating every unanswered question as an illness. [1]

Research on well-being also makes room for more than one kind of good. Richard Ryan and Edward Deci distinguish approaches concerned with pleasure and happiness from those concerned with meaning and fuller functioning. These perspectives can complement one another. A satisfying life may include enjoyment, absorbing work, affection, responsibility and growth, in combinations that change over time. [2]

Perhaps an afternoon was enjoyable but left us feeling disconnected from what matters. Perhaps caring for someone was exhausting and deeply meaningful. Perhaps we enjoyed ourselves completely, with no need to make the experience mean anything more. Paying attention to these differences helps us ask a more useful question than whether we are flourishing enough.

The life we learned to be good at

Before we could choose a philosophy of living, we were learning what made a place for us among other people. We noticed what brought approval, what worried the adults, and what seemed to make us welcome. Bowlby's attachment work offers a developmental way of thinking about how relationships shape expectations of care and the confidence to explore. [3] Within those relationships, a child may also come to associate belonging with being useful, easy, exceptional, undemanding or strong.

Some of what we learn becomes a genuine source of pleasure and contribution. Competence can be satisfying. Generosity can express love. Persistence can help us do work that matters. Understanding the history of these qualities should deepen our relationship with them, rather than make us suspicious of everything we do well.

The difficulty may appear when a capacity becomes compulsory. We can help, but cannot bear to disappoint. We can achieve, but cannot tolerate being ordinary. We can listen, but feel ashamed when we need someone to listen to us. A life organized this way may contain real value while leaving too little space for other experiences.

As we begin to question the arrangement, we may encounter more than uncertainty. There can be grief for the years spent proving something, tenderness toward the younger person who worked so hard, or fear that changing will cost us love. Someone else may discover that the familiar account does not fit: they are depleted because the demands are too great, because their health has changed, or because support is missing. A meaningful inquiry has to be willing to find a practical problem rather than an old wound.

We might ask where a valued strength still feels available by choice, and where it has become the price of admission. The answer can help us preserve what we love about ourselves while making room for something that has had less permission to live.

Wholeness includes what does not fit the familiar role

Jung's idea of individuation gives another way to approach this territory. In his account, becoming oneself involves more than identification with an external role. [4] We can take that invitation seriously without imagining a perfect, untouched self waiting to be uncovered beneath everything we have learned.

Consider the person who is always reasonable. Their judgment may be a real strength, while anger has something important to tell them. The person who is dependable may also long to be cared for. Someone who has built a thoughtful, serious life may discover an appetite for play that feels almost embarrassing. These are ordinary possibilities, not interpretations that have to be true of you.

Making room for an excluded experience does not mean letting it make every decision. Anger can reveal a limit while we remain responsible for how we speak. Desire can receive attention while another person's freedom remains intact. A wish for rest can matter alongside a commitment that cannot simply be abandoned. Wholeness involves the difficult work of allowing more of our experience to enter the conversation and then deciding how to live with it.

That conversation may change a role rather than end it. We may still be the person who organizes the gathering, but ask someone else to help. We may continue work we value while letting an unfinished task remain unfinished until morning. Development can happen within loyalty, marriage, family and community. It can also expose an arrangement that needs more substantial change. The meaning of the change has to be discovered in the life itself.

What is strong in you also deserves attention

If we look only for the injuries beneath a life, we can miss the capacities through which that life is already being lived. There may be humor, curiosity, kindness, persistence, discernment or a responsiveness to beauty that has survived difficult circumstances. These qualities deserve more than acknowledgment in passing.

Fatima Doman's writing on character strengths brings them into the foreground. She describes the importance of recognizing qualities that feel natural and engaging, and of honoring strengths in other people as well as ourselves. [5] This offers a welcome question alongside our attention to difficulty: *When do you feel engaged in a way you recognize as your own?*

You might notice it while explaining something patiently, finding an unexpected solution, welcoming someone who feels out of place, or becoming absorbed in a subject you love. A strength does not have to produce an impressive achievement to be worth knowing. Sometimes its expression is quiet enough that only the people closest to us see it.

Within this pathway, noticing strengths is an invitation to possibility, not a new description we must live up to. Being kind does not make us permanently available. Being courageous does not require us to ignore fear. Being good at something does not obligate us to do it whenever someone asks. A quality can be part of us without becoming our entire job in the world.

There can be pleasure in finding a fitting expression for a strength: the conversation that lets curiosity breathe, the practical task in which skill and usefulness meet, the shared joke that brings people closer. That pleasure is worth noticing. It may tell us something about the conditions under which we participate more freely, even when it does not tell us what to do with the rest of our lives.

Allowing something good to reach us

Joy can be surprisingly difficult to receive. We may begin enjoying ourselves and then remember unfinished work. We may feel tenderness and quickly make a joke. We may be moved by someone's care and immediately think about how to repay it. A pleasant moment arrives, but we are already preparing to leave it.

At other times there is no such interruption. We are simply tired, preoccupied or not enjoying the activity. Curiosity about joy should leave room for all of these possibilities. The point is to become more familiar with our experience, including what is welcome.

Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory proposes that positive emotions can widen the possibilities we notice and, over time, contribute to personal and relational resources. Her early work describes joy in relation to play, interest in relation to exploration, and contentment in relation to savoring. [6] This gives positive experience a place in development beyond being a reward for finishing the difficult work.

We might linger over a piece of music, stay a little longer in a conversation that feels good, or let ourselves register satisfaction in something we made. Such moments need not become exercises in self-improvement. Their value can be in the experience itself, and in whatever becomes possible when we give it attention.

Doman also writes about meeting uncomfortable emotions honestly and cultivating positive experience. [7] The approach taken here allows both to remain present: appreciation does not have to replace sorrow, and gratitude does not require us to excuse harm. We can be glad for a friendship while grieving someone who is gone. We can enjoy a small part of a day that remains difficult.

In experiential psychotherapy, Diana Fosha and Nathan Thoma describe attending to the positive feelings that accompany helpful change, including what happens as someone receives and reflects on that change with a therapist. [8] A modest educational invitation follows from this perspective: when something helps, we can pause long enough to notice what helped and how it was received. Did we feel less alone? More interested? Relieved? Uneasy about depending on someone? The answer makes the experience more particular and gives us something to carry forward.

Meaning can be missing in different ways

“My life has no meaning” can hold several different kinds of pain. Perhaps events no longer make sense. Perhaps there is nothing we feel drawn toward. Perhaps we are active and accomplished but do not feel that our existence matters to anyone. These experiences can overlap, but they invite different kinds of attention.

Frank Martela and Michael Steger distinguish three dimensions of meaning: coherence, or a sense that life makes sense; purpose, or direction; and significance, or a sense that life has value. [9] The distinction is

useful because a person may have one while struggling with another. We can know what we are doing tomorrow and still feel unseen. We can feel deeply loved and have no clear sense of what comes next.

More goals may do little for the ache of being unknown. A convincing explanation of our past may not provide the companionship we need now. A new activity may offer interest before it offers direction. When we become more precise about the absence, we may become more precise about the support we seek.

There is also a difference between feeling that we matter and having to prove that we deserve to matter. The former may grow through participation, recognition and care. The latter can keep moving the requirement just beyond our reach. Achievement may bring real satisfaction while leaving the fear of being unworthy untouched. Even after a meaningful contribution, we remain people who need rest, relationship and somewhere to be ordinary.

A life with others, within real limits

Yalom's existential perspective attends to death, freedom, isolation and meaning. He also emphasizes that these concerns should enter therapy through the person and the relationship, rather than being imposed by a theory. [10] We do not all need the same conversation, or need it at the same time.

Finitude may become personal through a loss, an illness, an aging parent, or the recognition that a long-deferred possibility is narrowing. This can bring urgency, but urgency is not always a wise guide. We may need time to grieve before deciding what to change. We may discover that something already present deserves more attention, rather than that everything must be replaced.

Choice also happens within conditions we did not choose. Money, health, discrimination, available care and obligations shape what is possible. Telling someone to follow their purpose cannot supply childcare, accessible transportation or a safe place to live. Sometimes the next meaningful step is a request for help, an arrangement of shared labor, or participation in changing the conditions that make a livable life harder to sustain.

Other people are more than a source of meaning for us. They have their own wishes, refusals and accounts of what helps. We may feel purposeful giving advice that was never wanted, or feel needed in an arrangement that leaves someone else little room to choose. Contribution becomes more trustworthy when we attend to its actual effect as well as our intention.

Receiving belongs here too. If we can only imagine mattering through what we provide, needing care may feel like falling out of the human community. Yet a relationship can deepen when we let another person know us, accept their help, or allow their presence to count. There are seasons when receiving is a central part of participation. Our place among others need not disappear when our capacity to produce changes.

Beginning with one part of an ordinary day

Imagine noticing that the end of most days feels empty. Before deciding that your whole life needs a different direction, you might look at one recent evening. What happened? Were you alone when you wanted company, surrounded by people with no room for yourself, or simply worn out? Was there a moment of interest or warmth that passed quickly? The more closely you look, the more an initial explanation may change.

Suppose curiosity still feels available, but most of your conversations have become practical exchanges. A small experiment might be to invite someone who welcomes the idea to talk over a meal about something you are both interested in. You might predict that a brief conversation will help you feel more connected. Choose a time and length that fit your energy and responsibilities, with room for either person to decline or stop.

Afterward, attend to the actual experience. Perhaps you enjoyed the conversation and would like another. Perhaps the topic interested you but the setting was too tiring. Perhaps you noticed that you wanted to be asked about your own life, and that shared information was not quite the contact you needed. Each response offers a different next step. An experiment becomes useful through what it reveals, including when it does not help.

You can begin just as well with a practical support need, a familiar pleasure, a wanted contribution, or a decision to preserve some solitude. There is no need to record anything or discuss more than you wish. If an inquiry becomes pressuring or overwhelming, return to something ordinary and consider what support would make it more manageable. Persistent emptiness or loss of interest that troubles you deserves care beyond a writing exercise.

The five modules in this pathway follow these questions through what matters, belonging, available choices, contribution and a wider sense of wholeness. They offer ways to return to experience and revise an understanding, rather than instructions for arriving at a finished self.

We may continue to carry questions for which there is no settled answer. A loss may remain a loss. A relationship may remain imperfect. Joy may appear in the middle of an ordinary afternoon, without resolving either. Still, we can become more available to the people and experiences that matter, and more honest about what needs to change. Over time, a life may begin to feel more inhabited through these particular acts of attention, care, pleasure and choice.

References and further reading

These sources contribute different kinds of knowledge: research, clinical theory, existential thought and strengths-based writing. Their perspectives inform this educational synthesis; they do not establish the effectiveness of this pathway or prescribe one form of a good life.

[1] Tallis, F. (2020). *The Act of Living: What the Great Psychologists Can Teach Us About Finding Fulfillment*. Basic Books. Publisher-hosted introduction excerpt.

- [2] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 141-166. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.141.
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- [4] Jung, C. G. (1966). *Two Essays in Analytical Psychology* (2nd ed., R. F. C. Hull, Trans.; Collected Works, Vol. 7). Princeton University Press. See “The Relations between the Ego and the Unconscious,” Part Two, “The Function of the Unconscious.” Original opening excerpt.
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- [6] Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 218-226. Research record and abstract.
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- [8] Fosha, D., & Thoma, N. (2020). Metatherapeutic processing supports the emergence of flourishing in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy*, 57(3), 323-339. doi:10.1037/pst0000289.
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- [10] Yalom, I. D. (2002). *The Gift of Therapy: An Open Letter to a New Generation of Therapists and Their Patients*. HarperCollins. Author-hosted introduction.

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