Meaning, Wholeness, and Human Flourishing · About 4 minutes

What Kind of Meaning Feels Missing?

Making a large question more particular

“My life has no meaning.” I would want to sit a little with what is missing before asking that sentence to explain a whole life.

That sentence sounds final. It can also be the beginning of a much more particular conversation. Does the person feel unknown? Have events disrupted the story they relied on? Are they unsure what to do next, or too exhausted to reach anything they value?

The distinction matters because advice usually arrives with an explanation already attached. Find a purpose. Join a group. Practice gratitude. A suggestion can be sensible and still answer a different question from the one being asked.

Listen for the missing thing

Ruth is a fictional woman who has retired from a training role. Her calendar is full. She enjoys some of her activities and generally knows what she will do each day. Yet she comes home feeling that nobody knows what has mattered to her. Friends suggest another course or a larger volunteering commitment. More opportunities aren't answering the emptiness.

In this version of Ruth's life, companionship may be part of what is missing: someone who remembers the thread of her experience, rather than simply another place to be busy. That remains a question for Ruth. If she says she has close company and is struggling with what her efforts now serve, the understanding needs to change.

Martela and Steger distinguish three dimensions of meaning: coherence, or making sense of life; purpose, or direction; and significance, or the feeling that life has value.[1] These distinctions can sharpen listening. They are not a complete map of human needs, and a person need not select a category before being taken seriously.

“I don't know what I want to move toward” asks something different from “I can't make sense of how my life changed.” “I have plans, but I miss being known” points somewhere else again. More than one may fit.

For Ruth, the next conversation might begin with the evenings when she comes home. What does she wish someone knew? Whose company has felt reciprocal? Would she rather talk about retirement, make something, or have an afternoon without another organized activity?

The answers may suggest a direction. They cannot create a willing friend or resources that are unavailable. Health, money, culture, and responsibilities affect what someone can pursue. A clear wish can remain unmet.

Sometimes a seemingly existential problem includes an immediate material need. “Nothing matters” may be spoken by someone who is exhausted, in pain, or frightened about housing. Reflection should remain open to discovering that care, medical assessment, or practical assistance belongs first. We do a person little service by turning every difficult circumstance into a question they must resolve inside themselves.

You can approach the broad sentence gently: when you say meaning is missing, what part of life feels most absent? There may be no answer yet. The person may need time, and the question may change.

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The longer reading takes up the question of meaning in a whole life. Here it helps to start with the piece Ruth misses enough to be able to name.

There may be one place in the day where the absence has a name. That is enough to begin a real conversation.

Companion reading · What Is This Life Asking of Me?

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Meaning, Wholeness, and Human Flourishing (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Martela, F., & Steger, M. F. (2016). The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance. The Journal of Positive Psychology, 11(5), 531–545. Source.

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