

When the Old Answers No Longer Hold

Meaning, vocation, and the clinical work of accompanying an unfinished life

Brian Kennedy, MA, LMFT

Therapist companion | Published 21 October 2026

A client has been describing a life full of commitments when the account begins to falter. There is affection for the people involved, pride in what has been built, and uncertainty about why the familiar arrangement has begun to feel insufficient. They do not have a clear request to bring us. They are trying to say something they have scarcely admitted to themselves: the reasons that once carried them through the day no longer seem to reach every part of their life.

Sometimes the question arrives through an unmistakable interruption. A profession ends. Children leave. Illness changes what can be planned. A relationship or community no longer offers the belonging it once did. The client may still know what tomorrow requires while wondering what their participation is for. They may be afraid that saying this will make us question the whole life, when they first need help giving the uncertainty a place within it.

We can feel the gravity of this and become eager to help. We ask about values, encourage an interest, suggest contribution, or reassure them that a new chapter will emerge. Each response may eventually have a place. Before choosing one, we need to know what has become difficult to live with. The person asking about meaning may need direction, recognition, practical support, company in grief, or room to acknowledge a wish they have been reluctant to take seriously.

My client article, [What Is This Life Asking of Me?](#), approaches these questions through belonging, strengths, choice, contribution, and wholeness. This companion follows the therapist alongside that process. It asks how we can help meaning become more available in lived experience while allowing the client's life to remain larger than our account of it.

The question beneath the sentence

“Nothing matters” can describe a philosophical conviction, a moment of despair, an exhausted evening, or a painful absence in an otherwise valued life. A client may mean that their efforts have little effect. They may mean that nobody seems interested in knowing them. They may be grieving a future they had assumed would arrive.

Our first task is to make the sentence more particular. When did it feel most true this week? What was happening? What had the person hoped would be there? We can remain attentive to persistent depression, a broad loss of interest, changes in functioning, and safety concerns while exploring the meaning of this person's words. An existential formulation does not settle an assessment.

Clara Hill's introduction to *Meaning in Life: A Therapist's Guide* distinguishes a person's experience of meaning from a universal explanation of existence. She also questions the assumption that everyone needs the same depth or amount of reflection.[1] This matters clinically. A person can

live with devotion and integrity without wanting a philosophical conversation about it. Another may need precisely that conversation after years of having their questions dismissed.

Consider Daniel, an invented illustration. The local newspaper where he worked for many years has closed. He is seeking other work and taking care of the immediate financial consequences. He tells his therapist that he feels useless. The therapist, familiar with his skill and commitment, suggests mentoring younger writers.

Daniel looks away. "I know I could do that. But everybody keeps finding things I can still be good for."

The suggestion was reasonable. It also moved quickly past something. Asked what he misses about the newsroom, he describes an argument over a headline, people interrupting one another, the familiar irritation of a colleague who would challenge a careless claim. Then he says, "There were people who expected me to turn up. I didn't have to arrange being part of something."

His work offered contribution, identity, income, companionship, and a place within a continuing conversation. A new task might restore one of these while leaving the others untouched. The therapist's explanation needs to become as differentiated as the loss.

A life can change the question it asks

The client article includes Frank Tallis's *The Act of Living*. His later book, *Wise*, takes up purpose, mortality, integration, and the passage of time beyond life's midpoint.[2] That broader scope offers a useful frame here: changes in a life may require reconsideration of what once organized it. The clinical implications must still be worked out with the person.

Someone who has spent decades establishing a livelihood may now be asking about relationship. A person who has devoted themselves to care may need to discover what they want when others need them differently. Another may want greater commitment after years of guarding freedom. The direction cannot be inferred from age or from our preferred account of development.

It would be easy to hear Daniel's loss as an invitation to move beyond work. But work mattered to him for reasons that deserve respect. It would be equally easy to help him recreate his old role without asking whether there were parts of it he no longer wants. A valued life can contain both things worth carrying forward and arrangements that have become too narrow.

The therapist can help distinguish the capacity from its former setting. Daniel's attention to language remains. So does his concern about public life. His need for colleagues is also real. These do not decide his next occupation, but they give the inquiry more substance than a general instruction to find purpose.

Letting an ending tell the truth

In "When Way Closes," Parker Palmer recalls his frustration at being told that a path would open if he waited faithfully. An older Quaker woman, Ruth, tells him that paths closing behind her have also offered guidance.[3] Her response gives limits a place in discernment without requiring advance knowledge of the next direction.

For a therapist, the implication is worth handling carefully. An ending can reveal that a particular arrangement is no longer possible. It does not establish that the ending was necessary, deserved, or secretly beneficial. We can learn from a closed path while wishing it had remained open.

Daniel may need to say that the paper should have survived. He may have justified anger about decisions made elsewhere. If the therapist keeps searching for the opportunity inside the closure, his protest becomes something he has to move beyond before he can be helped.

There is room to ask what the ending makes visible. Did he postpone other interests? Was the work more exhausting than he admitted? Does he want the same kind of employment? The answers may include affection, bitterness, relief, and uncertainty. Discernment becomes more honest when it can hold an unwanted fact without hurrying to improve its meaning.

We also need to tolerate the time this takes. A client may understand that something has ended long before they know how to live within the changed circumstances. The apparent lack of direction may be an accurate description of the present, rather than resistance to the next chapter we hope to help them write.

What Frankl asks us to take seriously

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl describes the remembered presence of his wife amid the brutality of imprisonment. The passage gives love a place in meaning when ordinary action has been radically constrained. Elsewhere in the reproduced excerpts, he considers the possibility of moral freedom under extreme coercion.[4]

These are powerful testimonies. A therapist must resist turning them into a standard against which another person's suffering is measured. Survival does not establish superior purpose, and devastation does not demonstrate a failure of attitude. Frankl's account cannot tell us what another person should be able to bear.

Its invitation here is to remain interested in what a person still cares about when familiar forms of agency have narrowed. This may concern someone loved, a responsibility, a conviction, or a possibility they cannot yet act upon. We can help them find words for that attachment without requiring a meaningful explanation of why the suffering occurred.

Crossing into a world we did not choose

John O'Donohue speaks of a threshold as "a line which separates two territories of spirit." In his interview *The Inner Landscape of Beauty*, he describes how a brief piece of news can leave someone inhabiting a different world, though the physical surroundings remain the same.[5]

The image helps us recognize why reassurance about what is still intact may miss the experience. The client knows that the house remains, that people still love them, that there are other possibilities. Yet the familiar organization of the world has changed. They may need company in discovering what the change means.

Daniel's therapist could remind him that his abilities have not disappeared. Daniel already knows this. What he is less able to imagine is a weekday in which there is somewhere he

belongs. His account may sound repetitive because the practical and relational consequences keep becoming newly apparent.

A response that stays near this might be: “It sounds as though you keep meeting the absence in different parts of the day.” That acknowledgment can let him describe the morning when he nearly sent a message to the old group. It can also make room for the irritation he feels when friends ask whether he is enjoying the break.

O'Donohue's language is a philosophical and spiritual resource. The therapist need not supply a spiritual explanation or assume that crossing will bring growth. What matters in the room is whether the person has more room to speak accurately about the world they now inhabit.

When searching becomes another burden

Some clients work at meaning with the same intensity they once brought to achievement. They read, journal, identify values, and examine every possible direction. The activity may be engaging. It may also become a way of postponing an ordinary choice until a larger answer guarantees it.

Crystal Park's review distinguishes efforts to make meaning from meanings actually made. It also identifies important gaps between rich theoretical accounts and their empirical support.[6] More searching cannot simply be counted as better adjustment. We need to ask what the inquiry is doing in this person's life.

Does reflection help Daniel recognize what he misses? Does it clarify a request, make grief more shareable, or reveal a practical next step? Or does each conversation end with another verdict that he has not yet found his purpose? Even thoughtful therapy can contribute to the latter if every session returns him to the same vast question.

We can make the work smaller without making it superficial. What would he like one part of next week to contain? What is he postponing until he understands his future? What support would make an actual choice possible? He may decide that a job application needs attention before further reflection. He may also discover that applying for work has become an excuse never to ask for company.

Neither the practical task nor the inner inquiry should automatically win. The therapist helps determine which question is alive in the encounter and whether the response offers something the person can use.

Meaning takes place among other people

The client article gives belonging an important place alongside purpose. In practice, the distinction can be painful. A person may be praised for contribution while having little opportunity to be known. They may occupy a valued role and remain lonely within it.

Daniel begins to recognize that mentoring is not objectionable in itself. What stung was the assumption that usefulness would meet the whole need. He misses being among people who could disagree with him without making the disagreement a problem to solve. He wants to belong where his presence includes more than a service.

The therapist asks what it is like to say that here. Daniel shrugs at first. “It sounds needy.”

“What sounds needy about it?”

“Wanting people to notice if I'm not there.”

There is a pause. The therapist lets the wish remain in the room, without immediately assuring him that many people would notice. Daniel adds, more quietly, “I thought that was just part of having a life.”

The feeling now has a particular shape. It is about the ordinary dependability of a place among others, and the loss of having that place without having to ask. Being able to say this may matter before a new arrangement is possible. The therapist's interest is also something Daniel can receive, question, or find insufficient.

We should not assume that this wish has an early origin. His current circumstances give ample reason for it. Developmental history may deepen the account if Daniel finds a connection. It should not replace recognition of an actual social loss with a story about his difficulty feeling secure.

A contribution does not have to be widely visible

At the end of *Middlemarch*, George Eliot attends to Dorothea's influence through “unhistoric acts.” The same closing pages examine the social conditions that limited the forms her life could take.[7] Both movements matter: ordinary contribution deserves recognition, and constraint should not be disguised as a noble preference.

This creates a useful tension for therapy. We can help a client see the importance of a quiet act without praising them into a life that asks too much. We can recognize the meaning of care while taking seriously its unequal distribution. We can respect a modest ambition without deciding that the wish for wider influence is vanity.

Daniel may come to value work that reaches fewer people. He may continue to want a public role. The therapist's admiration for a simpler life is no more authoritative than the culture's admiration for a prominent one. What fits has to be discovered through his values, capacities, circumstances, and experience.

The person receiving a contribution also matters. Offering help may bring Daniel satisfaction while giving the recipient something they did not want. If he explores mentoring, he will need to ask what kind of contact a younger writer welcomes. Purpose becomes more relationally trustworthy when the other person can influence its form.

Nor is contribution the only way to remain a participant in human life. There are times when illness, disability, or exhaustion makes receiving care central. The person who needs support has not become an unfinished argument for their own worth. Therapy should leave them able to matter without having to find an acceptable way to repay existence.

The pressure of an unfinished life

Keats's sonnet “When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be” imagines death interrupting unwritten work and an experience of love. It does not conclude with a reassuring plan for completing everything.[8] Its force lies partly in allowing the fear of an unlived future to remain recognizable.

Clients often bring something like this without speaking directly about death. Time is passing. A possibility is narrowing. They are afraid that a decision will close another path, or that their life will be judged by something never completed. We can listen for the specific loss within that urgency.

Sometimes there is a feasible action to take. Sometimes there is mourning for a possibility whose time has passed. Often there are both. Telling a client that it is never too late can remove the very fact they are trying to face. Telling them to accept limits can close a question that still deserves exploration.

The therapist's task includes noticing how our own unfinished life enters the conversation. We may encourage a risk we wish we had taken, defend a compromise we have made, or become impatient with uncertainty that resembles our own. The client's decision should not have to reassure us that a life can turn out well.

Supervision and personal reflection can help make these investments visible. In the session, their practical expression may be a greater willingness to ask another question, acknowledge an assumption, or stop supplying an answer that the client has not requested.

Returning to a life already in conversation

David Whyte's "Everything Is Waiting for You" brings attention to ordinary surroundings through the line "Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity." [9] The poem imagines participation as something that can be encountered in the world around us, alongside the private search for an answer.

That is an invitation, not a correction of actual loneliness. A familiar street cannot replace a needed relationship, and a poem should not be used to tell someone that their isolation is imaginary. Its usefulness here is the question it opens: what contact might be possible before the whole future becomes clear?

Daniel remembers a former colleague with whom he enjoyed disagreeing about books. He chooses to ask whether she would like a short walk. He expects she will assume he wants help finding work. They consider how he could make the invitation more direct while leaving her free to decline.

She accepts. The walk is companionable, but conversation repeatedly returns to job leads. Daniel appreciates the concern and feels the old frustration. At their next session, he says the experiment did not work.

The therapist asks what he had hoped for and what actually occurred. Daniel notices that the company mattered. He also recognizes that he did not say he wanted a break from discussing work. The original account changes: contact was possible, but the request remained partly hidden.

A next invitation might include a clearer sentence. It might involve someone else or another setting. Daniel has learned something about belonging without proving that his larger loss is resolved. His colleague's goodwill and limits remain part of the account.

How the pathway can hold the inquiry

The five modules of Meaning, Wholeness, and Human Flourishing give this movement a structure clients can return to between sessions. We can select a passage or practice that fits the current work, then make room for the client's response when they return.

What Makes a Life Feel Meaningful? helps specify an absence or valued experience. With Daniel, that meant distinguishing usefulness from a place among peers. A broad statement became a question that could be approached.

Connection and Belonging explores the form of participation actually available. An invitation and its response can reveal whether company, recognition, shared responsibility, or another quality is being sought. More contact is not automatically better-fitting contact.

Agency and Authenticity concerns a choice the client can genuinely make. Daniel cannot decide how his colleague understands the walk. He can say more clearly what he is inviting her into, listen to her preference, and take responsibility for his own agreement.

Purpose, Service, and Creativity allows a contribution to become more particular. The therapist can help distinguish a wanted offer, a genuine duty, an expression of a strength, and an attempt to settle worth through usefulness. Mixed motives can be explored without requiring purity before action.

Wholeness, Mystery, and Transcendence gathers what has become clearer while leaving room for an unanswered larger question. Clients may bring faith, skepticism, cultural traditions, or uncertainty. The work should remain usable without a prescribed belief or an account in which suffering had to happen.

Across the modules, the therapist can preserve a complete learning movement: an encounter, a possible explanation, the client's correction, a chosen experiment and prediction, an actual result, and a revised account. A practice that was declined or proved unhelpful can still clarify what is needed. The platform offers educational continuity; therapy offers a responsive relationship in which the teaching itself can be questioned.

Daniel may remain uncertain about his future. He may still want the newsroom back. Yet he can become more precise about what was lost, more direct about what he seeks, and more able to participate in a particular encounter before deciding what it means for his whole life.

We can accompany that movement with seriousness and affection. A life need not be given a final explanation before it deserves our attention, and a client need not resolve its larger questions to find something they can honestly turn toward next.

References and reading boundaries

Daniel and all dialogue are newly invented educational illustrations. Clinical applications are integrative reasoning, rather than findings established by a single source. Literature and philosophy illuminate the inquiry; they do not demonstrate clinical effects.

1. Hill, C. E. (2018). *Meaning in life: A therapist's guide*. American Psychological Association. [Publisher-authorized introduction](#). Five-page introduction consulted; not the full book or treatment chapters.
2. Tallis, F. (2026). *Wise: Finding purpose, meaning and wisdom beyond the midpoint of life*. Abacus. [Publisher overview](#). General scope verified from the publisher; book text unavailable in this review. No quotation, detailed argument, or neural claim is attributed to unread chapters.
3. Palmer, P. J. (2015, January 28). *When way closes*. The On Being Project. [Author essay](#), excerpting *Let Your Life Speak*. Complete short essay consulted; not the complete book.
4. Frankl, V. E. *Man's search for meaning*, Part I, "Experiences in a Concentration Camp." [Original excerpts reproduced by PBS](#). Both reproduced passages consulted, concerning remembered love and moral freedom; not a full-book or Part II review. First German publication 1946; wording and page numbers vary by English edition.
5. O'Donohue, J. (2008). *The inner landscape of beauty*. Interview with Krista Tippett, The On Being Project. [Original interview transcript](#). Selected threshold passages consulted; spiritual interpretation is distinguished from clinical observation.
6. Park, C. L. (2010). Making sense of the meaning literature: An integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(2), 257-301. [Original review](#). Abstract, introductory framework, and selected methodological/adjustment passages consulted; not every study in the review.
7. Eliot, G. (1871-1872). *Middlemarch*, Finale. [Original text](#). Complete Finale consulted, particularly Dorothea's contribution and social constraints; not the full novel. Short quoted phrase checked.
8. Keats, J. *When I have fears that I may cease to be*. [Complete original sonnet](#). Complete fourteen-line poem consulted; literary interpretation is offered rather than a clinical prescription.
9. Whyte, D. *Everything is waiting for you*. [Poem and author's reading, The On Being Project](#). Complete permissioned poem consulted; seven-word quotation checked. The poem appears in *Everything Is Waiting for You* (2003) and *River Flow: New & Selected Poems*.