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TOWARDS A PEDAGOGY OF LIFE PURPOSES

by

MANNY LOPEZ

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Manny Lopez

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Towards a Pedagogy of Life Purposes

by

Manny Lopez

Advisor: Kenneth Tobin

With academic endeavors, students who understand how the courses that they are enrolled in connect with their broader life goals are more likely to apply an approach of task perseverance. Yet, nearly three million adolescent community college students in the United States may not have developed a clear sense of purpose in life. Relatedly, overtime the lack of clear purposes in life contributes to maladaptive behavior.

This dissertation is a compilation of three interrelated studies that took place in two public community colleges in the City University of New York. Guided by authentic inquiry and framed by sociocultural theory, central to each study in this manuscript is the question, what can be learned about life purposes from students enrolled in two urban public community colleges? One outcome of my research is a *Life Purposes Heuristic (LPsH)* that is informed by Dignity Therapy and is included for review and utilization.

ABOUT THIS DISSERTATION

Chapter 1, *Education without purpose.* In this chapter, I provide an overview of my research frameworks, methodologies and methods for the various studies documented in this dissertation. My research focuses on the educational and life purposes of students at two urban public community colleges in New York City. According to my research, nearly three million community college students in the United States may not have developed a clear sense of purpose in life.

Chapter 2, *Rationale for designing a life purposes heuristic informed by dignity therapy for community college students.* In this chapter, I present a rationale for a Life Purposes Heuristic (LPsH) that is informed by Dignity Therapy. Grounded in contemplative practices of reflection and awareness, I suggest that identifying *purposes in life* and *making meaning* of lived experiences can enlighten college students' reasons for learning. Being that the institution of community college is not designed for reflection and purpose identification, I propose that students enrolled at two-year post-secondary academic institutions is a group well suited to benefit from a heuristic to help with enriching their learning experiences. Nearly 3 million community college students in the United States may have not developed a clear purpose in life. A freshly minted Life Purposes Heuristic is included for review and utilization.

Chapter 3, *The life purposes heuristic-(LPsH).* Heuristics are tools to nudge our awareness and our behavior. So much of what we do is enacted without awareness of what is most important to us. We can easily autopilot through a day or more without consciously connecting our actions to our purposes in life. Before we know it, our lived experiences can become a series of unsatisfying monotonous tasks. In this chapter I describe what I learn

from a student enrolled at an urban public community college, who mediates reflection using The Life Purposes Heuristic (LPsH).

Chapter 4, *Purpose in life, anxiety, and success* is a multi-method study designed to: 1) Learn about community college students' awareness of meaning in life, and 2) to learn about students' emotions when they reflect on meaning in their respective lives. The study uses an original Purpose in Life Heuristic (PiLH) designed by modifying the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). Immediately following completion of the heuristic, student respondents were engaged in cogenerative dialogues.

Chapter 5, *Reframe and cushion adversity*. In this chapter I look to cognitive behavioral theory, polyvagal theory and mindfulness to interpret two students' academic and life experiences. Reframing and Cushioning are two constructs that emerged from the cogenerative dialogues with both students. I have translated this chapter into standard Spanish language to expand potential readership for the pragmatic applications of the concepts highlighted in this text.

Chapter 6, *A Life of symbolism?* In this chapter I problematize the construct life purposes and ask whose purposes are we living? In the first part of the chapter, I use interaction ritual theory to offer the notion that concrete symbols are needed to sustain abstract life purposes. The second section of this chapter is a self-study where I explore the pathway to one of my life purposes which spans the initial semester, I was a doctoral student in the Urban Education Ph.D. Program at the City University of New York, Graduate Center. Learning from life experiences and making the world a better place are cornerstones of my axiology. My hope is that other doctoral students might find motivation and clarification of purposes in life from engaging with this text.

DEDICATIONS

You are the foundation of my core values, my late grandmother.

Your faith and love protect me daily. I honor my wonderful mother.

You triggered my search for purpose. Thank you, my father.

You are the reason why everything good is better and anything bad is tolerable. Thank you, love of my life, my wife.

You have been my role model my whole life, my only brother.

You and the children are my motivation. Thank you for trusting me, my sister.

I love you with my soul, my nephew and niece.

Maddening monotonous norm

I wish I was of Dragon form

Expelling rains of Fire storm

Scorn the evil born

Original poem

Undertaking the pursuit of a doctoral degree including writing a dissertation in which I share my interpretations of experiences, explicate concepts, and (re)construct knowledge is an act of courage, love, and care.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge my ancestors and take pride in knowing that their wisdom is within me.

It is my honor to learn and to teach every day.

Kenneth Tobin - Thank you for agreeing to be my dissertation advisor. I have learned so much from you about learning, teaching, and research. I am still learning to breathe both literally and figuratively. Without a doubt I am a better version of myself today compared to who I was six years ago because of your direct impact on me and the ripple effects that commenced with you. Thank you for the work you have done with me and for all that you do for others.

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I certainly would not have been able to commence this awesome experience if not for Nelson Reynoso and Howard Wach. So many other friends, colleagues and loved ones have contributed to my growth. Thank you all.

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CHAPTER 1

EDUCATION WITHOUT PURPOSE

Lucidity about one's life purposes translates to effort on tasks. With academic endeavors, students who understand how the courses that they are enrolled in connect with their broader life goals are more likely to apply an approach of task perseverance despite the inevitable academic challenges that arise (Yeager, et al., 2014). Relatedly, overtime the lack of clear purposes in life contributes to maladaptive behavior. Damon and colleagues (2003) have identified the pathologies that can result from a sense of insignificance or purposelessness:

Research has shown that the personal effects of purposelessness may include self-absorption, depression, addictions, and a variety of psycho-somatic ailments, and the social effects may include deviant and destructive behavior, a lack of productivity and an inability to sustain stable interpersonal relations (p. 120).

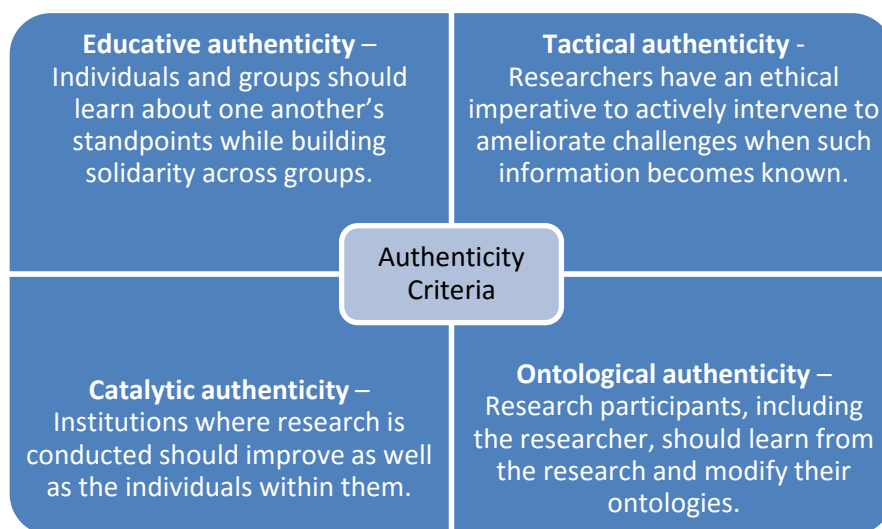
Only about 20% of adolescents develop a clear purpose in life (Bronk, 2011). How many students might this be in the community college populace? According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), during 2017, of the 7.1 million students enrolled in community colleges, slightly more than half or 3.6 million students were younger than 21 years of age. Therefore, nearly three million (2.88M) community college students in the United States may not have developed a clear sense of purpose in life.

Innate in many days of our life are occasions for knowing our purposes. I argue that apathetically drifting through experiences without intentionally reflecting on meaningful life events and extracting purposes is a flawed approach for living a life of significance. Every moment affords us an opportunity to deliberately learn about who we are and to enact behaviors of who we would like to become. That is to say that purposefully reflecting on salient life experiences reveals our core values and informs our hopes and dreams which enable us to enact decisions and behaviors that can align with who we want to be and inform our aspirations. Yet,

this way of knowing is not prioritized in an established way in formal American educational systems.

This manuscript is an account of my exploration of educational purpose with adult students matriculated at two urban public community colleges: Bronx Community College and Guttman Community College of the City University of New York. Additionally, I detail my design process of a reflexivity boosting intervention intended to aid in the identification and expansion of life purposes for community college students. Building on principles and methods in the arenas of education, sociology and psychology, the research I present in this manuscript is situated in cultural sociology which posits that we exist in a mutual relationship with others and our surroundings and that we both shape and are shaped by our social experiences in everyday interaction and conversations (Vygotsky, 1978). This work is also guided by an emancipatory axiology – teaching and learning are acts of liberation from physical and symbolic forms of oppression.

The authenticity criteria (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) align with my axiological stance and research lens. Adapted by Tobin (2012) the authenticity criteria have four interrelated constructs that inform how I do research: ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical.



Doing research that is grounded deeply in theory and for the benefit of others is moral. Prior to studying authentic inquiry as a framework for research, justice, care for others, self-care, and knowledge of self, have been values of mine taught to me by my late paternal grandmother and parents. Having learned how to frame my research in a responsible and caring way is liberating and emotional. I am reminded of my late grandmother and I watching nature documentaries together when I was an adolescent. Some of the scenes that most resonated with us were of injured animals dying, trapped, or in pain. My dear grandmother would get upset and lament why the videographers were not helping the animals (rather than just documenting their demise).

As a new researcher today, I embrace my grandmother's value for protecting life and questioning the bystander. While there is worth in documenting our observations, there too is a benefit in aiding those who are the object of our inquiry in the moment of their need. Hence, authentic inquiry is a framework devoted to the welfare of all and offers researchers additional ways of interpreting phenomena and ameliorating dilemmas.

Observing, nudging, and documenting changes in ontologies, axiologies, and epistemologies, including my own as they emerge, is a general goal of this author's research design. Hence, the studies documented in this manuscript details my observations and interpretations of events to inform theory which can enhance practice and vice versa. I have also sought to design a *life purposes* intervention to illuminate that construct in those who may not be aware of it. Beneficence is an impetus for writing this dissertation.

The below described research has sparked my interest in and informed my design of a life purposes intervention. Interventions to influence thoughts, feelings, and emotions can be effective without necessarily being complicated and extensive (Yeager, 2016). In fact, there are

various examples of brief exercises used effectively in the academic setting to enhance student success. Heuristics as a mindfulness tool have been shown to afford shifts towards enactment in various aspects of social life. Powietrzyńska, Tobin and Alexakos, (2015), developed a Mindfulness in Education heuristic as a tool to improve teaching and learning with high school science students. Many other education scholars develop and utilize heuristics to illuminate salient information and transform behavior toward the goal of transforming practice through research. Katelin Corbett (2018) designed and used a heuristic as a mindfulness intervention with preservice and in-service science teachers. Shequana Wright (2018) uses heuristics in her teacher preparation courses to encourage the exploration of various emotions. Leah Denise Pride (2018) used heuristics as mindfulness tools for discussing “thorny topics” with science teachers in a Brooklyn College course. Bundick (2011) studied whether reflecting and discussing purpose in life has a lasting effect on life satisfaction of college students. The one-on-one unstructured one-time discussions about purpose, life goals, and values lasted approximately 45-minutes. Bundick’s study shows that the goal-directedness component of purpose was sustained up to 9 months after the brief reflection and discussion. Yeager and Walton (2011) warn against the potential for reduced efficacy of socio-psychological educational interventions that are taken to scale. Still, they provide evidence for brief interventions that can be impactful in educational settings and show examples where the interventions are not effective.

Following Tobin, Bundick, and Yeager, I began to design a *Purpose in Life Heuristic* (PiLH) intervention then later a *Life Purposes Heuristic* (LPsH) intervention for students enrolled at the community colleges where I conducted my research. The heuristic interventions underwent various design iterations which I describe in chapter 1 and more thoroughly review in chapters 2, 3, and 4.

First things First

Radical Listening (Tobin, 2009) is the initial and primary research method I used for my studies. As a researcher who employs radical listening, I endeavor to be non-judgmental or suspend judgement, be empathetic, and attempt to see things through the eyes of others. In the same way that I listen to others for understanding, I also listen radically to myself continuously to become mindful of judgements I have of others and of myself. Together with radical listening, I employ Cogenerative Dialogues (Bayne, 2012) as a critical pedagogical methodology and method. Cogenerative Dialogues of cogens are reflective conversations where every participant is acknowledged. Cogens are not restricted to any specific field, like the classroom, but flexible in spaces they can be enacted. The discourse is used to coteach, construct knowledge and catalyze change (Bayne, 2013) while also mediating the collaborative generation of culture. Participation in radical listening and cogens also have pragmatic applications for building awareness and cogenerating solutions. As such, a major purpose of this manuscript is to study and document practices to inform theory and utilize theory for improving practices.

Imperative for my interpretative research and comprehension of what is happening and why it is happening, I embrace the hermeneutic-phenomenological research framework. Through this explanatory process of investigating what and why, I produce text that is descriptive to afford the reader opportunities to engage with the literature and determine whether and how research applies to them. For example, included in chapter 6 is a self-study with thick descriptions about the doctoral program experience for me.

First Iteration of my Heuristic – Purpose in Life Heuristic (PiLH)

Various psychometric tools have been developed to measure the presence or pursuit of purpose. For example, Crumbaugh and Maholick's (1964) Purpose in Life test; Reker and Peacock's (1981) Life Attitude Profile; Ryff's (1989) Sense of Purpose in Life scale is one component of her Psychological Wellbeing measure; Bundick's, et al (2006) Youth Purpose Survey (revised); Steger's et al (2006) Meaning in Life Questionnaire and Sharma's, et al (2017) Sense of Purpose Scale. This dissertation is *not* written to measure the presence of or pursuit of life purpose or meaning in life. Such tools have been thoroughly developed and researched by the aforementioned scholars. Rather, my goal is to design an intervention that uncovers and enhances the awareness of the construct of life purposes for community college students.

Having been exposed to heuristics (e.g., mindfulness heuristic, authentic inquiry heuristic) in the doctoral program and at research squad meetings at CUNY's Graduate Center, there were elements that that I believed would make for a valuable Purpose in Life Heuristic. The intervention should neither interfere with classroom instruction nor necessitate changes in curricula or creation of new courses. The intervention I envision would be a short series of standard reflexive questions with basic language for ease of utilization and understanding, but precise enough to invoke the highly individualistic and personal construct of life purposes. Similar in look and feel to a survey or a questionnaire, yet different in its function, the reflexive questions in the intervention I design must be thought-provoking and move the user through a process of both critical reflection on meaningful life experiences and envisioning a life worth living.

Knowing that I wanted an intervention to tap into constructs about purpose and meaning, I reviewed the literature extensively for scales that appeared to be well established. I decided to

use the *Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (MLQ) developed by Steger, et al (2006). The 10-question tool with 7-point Likert scale ranging from “absolutely untrue” to “absolutely true” was designed to gauge the presence and search for meaning and purpose in life. While the goal of the MLQ tool is to establish causality, the intervention I endeavored to develop is to illuminate the construct purposes in life – a heuristic intervention that is generative in that the characteristics are objects for reflection and changes in practice (Powietrzynska, et al., 2015).

I borrowed 4 characteristics from the MLQ: *I feel my life has a clear purpose. I am looking for something that makes my life meaningful. I have a clear sense of what makes my life meaningful. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.* I included the fifth characteristic because of how closely aligned a career is thought to be with purpose in life: *I have discovered the right career for me.* In chapter 4, I show the responses to the heuristic and examine why negative emotions were evoked in various students when exposed to the Purpose in Life heuristic.

Table 1.1. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire and The Purpose in Life Heuristic

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire	The Purpose in Life Heuristic
<p><i>MLQ Please take a moment to think about what makes your life feel important to you. Please respond to the following statements as truthfully and accurately as you can, and please remember that these are very subjective questions and that there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer according to the scale below:</i></p> <p><i>Absolutely True 1 --- Absolutely Untrue 7</i></p> <p><i>1. I understand my life's meaning.</i></p> <p><i>2. I am looking forward to something that makes my life feel meaningful.</i></p> <p><i>3. I am always looking to find my life's purpose.</i></p> <p><i>4. My life has a clear sense of purpose.</i></p> <p><i>5. I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.</i></p> <p><i>6. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.</i></p> <p><i>7. I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.</i></p> <p><i>8. I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.</i></p> <p><i>9. My life has no clear purpose.</i></p> <p><i>10. I am searching for meaning in my life.</i></p> <p><i>MLQ syntax to create Presence and Search subscales:</i></p> <p><i>Presence: 1, 4, 5, 6, & 9 (reverse-coded)</i></p> <p><i>Search: 2, 3, 7, 8 & 10</i></p> <p><i>The copyright for this scale is owned by the University of Minnesota. The questionnaire is intended for free use in research and clinical applications. Please contact Michael S. Steger prior to any such noncommercial use. This questionnaire may not be used for commercial purposes.</i></p>	<p><i>For each statement circle the numeral that best reflects your current state of mindfulness with purpose in life. As necessary provide contextual information that applies to your ratings.</i></p> <p>1. I feel my life has a clear sense of purpose.</p> <p>5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue</p> <p>Comments:</p> <p>2. I am looking for something that makes my life meaningful.</p> <p>5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue</p> <p>Comments:</p> <p>3. I have a clear sense of what makes my life meaningful.</p> <p>5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue</p> <p>Comments:</p> <p>4. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.</p> <p>5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue</p> <p>Comments:</p> <p>5. I have discovered the right career for me.</p> <p>5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue</p> <p>Comments:</p>

Second Iteration of my Heuristic - Life Purposes Heuristic (LPsH)

I learned from students' reactions to the PiLH that to improve comprehension of the characteristics, I had to describe the associated constructs and their component concepts. In other words, rather than the PiLH intervention characteristic reading, *I have a clear sense of what makes my life meaningful* the characteristic for the revised LPsH reads: *What are the most*

important roles you have played in your life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Another difference with version 2 of the intervention is the characteristics are reflective questions, rather than declarative statements. It is worth mentioning again here that my research is not designed to measure the presence of or search for purpose in life. Instead, the goal of LPsH intervention is to propagate emotions, feelings, and thoughts about the construct of Life Purposes to nudge students toward focused behaviour.

In chapters 2 and 3, I present a rationale for modifying the Dignity Therapy (DT) Psychotherapeutic questionnaire (Chochinov, 2011) as a Life Purposes heuristic. DT is a nonpharmacological therapy used in palliative care to boost sense of dignity of individuals suffering terminal or life limiting diseases, often cancer. Aspects of DT are important for me to capture in the LPsH (see Table 1.2). As examples, two Dignity Therapy themes are “maintenance of pride” and “hopefulness” that I would like to translate to the Life Purpose Heuristic. Many of the DT themes are transferable to the LPsH, but not all. As an example, “aftermath concerns” is important for identifying purposefulness, but less pronounced in the LPsH than the DT protocol. Characteristics like the following are not included in the LPsH because of the direct focus on “aftermath concerns”: *Are there words or perhaps even instructions you would like to offer your family, to help prepare them for the future?* Still, I included characteristics situated in the theme of generativity, such as: *What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others?*

How Deep is Your Purpose?

Beyond the interest in designing an awareness enhancing heuristic focused on purpose in life to support advancement towards academic endeavors I am intrigued by purpose as a complementary construct for wellness. According to research, the presence of purpose in life

promotes and sustains well-being in many domains of human health. We know that purpose is a powerful construct that has psychobiological advantages. (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Having life purposes can buffer against stress. Excessive stress is linked to a multitude of health problems. Lei Yu, et al., (2014) find that purpose in life may reduce the risk of macroscopic lacunar infarcts (also known as strokes). Hill and Turiano (2014) identify purpose in life as a predictor of mortality across stages of adulthood. They report that purposeful adults lived longer than their counterparts during the 14-year period studied. Ryff (2004) shows linkages between purpose in life and diverse biomarkers in a study of older women. The study shows preliminary results of high purpose engagement among older women is associated with lower levels of inflammation responses, lower salivatory cortisol (indicator for stress), longer periods of sleep, faster onset of REM sleep, and lower total HDL cholesterol ratios (markers for heart disease). Boyle, Buchman, Barnes, and Bennett (2012) find that “higher levels of purpose in life reduce the deleterious effects Alzheimer’s disease pathologic changes on cognition in advanced age” (p. 499). Maintaining a strong sense of purpose is important for physical health and mental wellness.

In this chapter, I identify educational and life purposes of students at two urban public community college as an area of research inquiry. Students who recognize that their academic endeavors connect with their life goals are more likely to persevere in school. According to my research, nearly three million community college students in the United States may not have developed a clear sense of purpose in life. Therefore, I have endeavored to develop an intervention to illuminate one’s purposes in life. I have designed two separate heuristics modeled after The Meaning in Life Questionnaire and Dignity Therapy. The short literature review in this chapter shows that the presence of purpose in life promotes and sustains well-being.

Table 1.2. Life Purposes Heuristic modeled after Dignity Psychotherapy Protocol

<i>Dignity Psychotherapy Interview Questions</i>	<i>Life Purposes Heuristic</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Tell me a little about your life history; particularly the parts that you either remember most, or think are the most important? When did you feel most alive? – Are there specific things that you would want your family to know about you, and are there particular things you would want them to remember? – What are the most important roles you have played in life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Why were they so important to you and what do you think you accomplished in those roles? – What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of? – Are there particular things that you feel still need to be said to your loved ones, or things that you would want to take the time to say once again? – What are your hopes and dreams for your loved ones? – What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, other (s)]? – Are there words or perhaps even instructions you would like to offer your family, to help prepare them for the future? – In creating this permanent record, are there other things that you would like included? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reflect on your life history, particularly the parts that you either remember most, or think are the most important? When did you feel most alive? – Are there specific things that you would want your loved ones to know about you, and are there particular things you would want them to remember about you? – What are the most important roles you have played in your life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Why are they so important to you, and what do you think you accomplished within those roles? – What important roles do you look forward to in your life? Why are they so important to you? – What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of? – What are your hopes and dreams for the world beyond yourself? – What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, siblings, other(s)]? – What are your top two core values or principles that drive your behavior (e.g., peace, wealth, happiness, success, friendship, fame, authenticity, power, influence, justice, integrity, joy, love recognition, family, truth, wisdom, status, etc.)?

CHAPTER 2

RATIONALE FOR DESIGNING A LIFE PURPOSES HEURISTIC INFORMED BY DIGNITY THERAPY

In psycho-behavioral research the presence of *Meaning* and/or pursuit of *Purposes in Life* are shown to have beneficial effects on our well-being and optimal human functioning (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Meaning and Purpose in Life are complicated and interrelated concepts (Ryff, 2018). Meaning is reflective and can contextualize our experiences. Purpose is a forward-looking construct with the potential to focus our intentions. Acknowledging our meaningful lived experiences coupled with the pursuit of purposes can activate a life worth living.

Identifying one's life trajectories is challenging and can arouse negative emotions. As an example, which college degree to pursue can be confusing, frustrating and may even discourage students from completing requirements for a college degree. Many students go through their entire community college experience unsure about their educational aspirations. In some ways, uncertainty makes sense because a goal of liberal education is to explore majors and figure out which academic programs align with students' skills and interests. Still, academic advisors and educators know first-hand what studies show – most students who matriculate at community colleges do not graduate in two years, they are often unsure which academic program to pursue, and frequently change their majors during their tenure in college (Schneider, 2019). Students hesitancy to connect and follow-through with a program of study has negative ramifications on degree completion, financial aid availability, and wealth accumulation. Hence, I designed a heuristic to illuminate constructs of meaning and purposes in life to support identification and pursuit of aspirations for community college students.

HEURISTICS MEDIATE REFLEXIVITY

Heuristics are a nudge towards reflexivity to raise awareness about constructs and bring about change if and as desirable. (Powietrzyńska, Tobin, & Alexakos, 2015). As an example, stop reading now and contemplate a memorable maxim, your favorite quote, or an affirmation. You might also recall the lyrics of an unforgettable song. Reflect on the affirmation, say the words of the maxim, or sing the song, to yourself, now. What does the affirmation, maxim, quote, or song, mean to you? Which emotions are evoked? How do you feel? How might the affirmation inform your behavior? Affirmations have the potential to influence our thinking, action, and behavior.

Heuristics can be thought of like salient affirmations, maxims, quotes, or lyrics to a song, that we refer to as characteristics, that both subversively and explicitly push our awareness and behavior. Heuristics can be but are not just a collection of words. As an example, my colleague, Corinna Brathwaite investigates physiological effects of emotions on teachers in the classroom. She uses finger pulse oximeters heuristically to improve health and wellness by illuminating teachers' blood oxygenation and heart rate in the classroom.

We design heuristics to be flexible, or to “shapeshift” to heighten awareness of the unaware (Powietrzyńska, 2015) via anyone or combination of the five human senses. Thus, there is an art to the science of developing awareness enhancing heuristics. The design and application of heuristics is limited only by our creative intelligence. Following are examples of multimodal occurrences of our senses receiving information that bring **Health** and **Safety** to our consciousness:

- The sight of a person smoking a cigarette through a tracheotomy can raise awareness about the dangers of smoking and potentially nudge someone to stop or reduce smoking cigarettes.
- The smell of burning food in our home can raise awareness about ensuring the stove is off before leaving home and might trigger someone to install smoke detectors.
- The feeling of a sunburn can raise awareness about skin cancer and might prompt someone to use sunscreen lotion or protective clothing.

- The sound of a person coughing can raise awareness about our own health and might encourage someone to wash their hands thoroughly.
- The taste of spoiled food can raise awareness about consumption of nutritional foods and might push someone to review the sell by date on other consumer packaged foods.

In each example above a provocation signals one or more of the senses to mediate our attention which then induces action. In our research and our practices, we design interventions consistent with reflexivity to prompt awareness and action in the unaware (Alexakos, et al., 2016). The heuristic facilitates contemplative behavior, including awareness and reflection. I first became aware of heuristics as an intervention designed to increase the incidence of mindfulness in 2013 when I read Tobin's article titled, *A Sociocultural Approach to Science Education*. Powietrzyńska, Tobin, and Alexakos developed a Mindfulness in Education heuristic as a tool to improve teaching and learning with high school science students. Many other education scholars develop and utilize heuristics to illuminate salient information and transform behavior toward the goal of transforming practice through research. The Authentic Inquiry research framework heuristic was developed by Alexakos and Tobin (2015). Katelin Corbett (2018) designed and used a heuristic as a mindfulness intervention with preservice and in-service science teachers. Shequana Wright (2018) uses heuristics in her teacher preparation courses to encourage the exploration of various emotions. Leah Denise Pride (2018) used heuristics as mindfulness tools for discussing "thorny topics" with science teachers in a Brooklyn College course.

A well-designed heuristic can help to illuminate recipients' purposes in life. Benefits can extend beyond the individuals exposed to the heuristic via the ripple effects to others who learn from interacting and being with participants exposed to the intervention (Tobin & Ritchie, 2012). Later in the chapter I describe various reasons why awareness, reflection and purpose in life matter in general and for community college students specifically.

In researching the characteristics to develop a heuristic to boost community college students' contemplation of the constructs of meaning in life and purposes in life, I encountered Dignity Therapy (DT), a novel intervention used in palliative care (Chochinov, 2005).

THE DIGNITY EFFECT

DT is a non-pharmacological psychotherapeutic intervention designed to enhance the end of life experience for people with life threatening and life limiting illness (Chochinov, 2005). Research shows that DT works for many people. Individuals with life limiting illness who have participated in DT reported feeling increases in both their purpose in life and their sense of meaning (Chochinov, 2011). DT has proven to be accepted in palliative care for psychosocial and spirituality dimensions of wellness.

DT has been studied many years and seems to have a wide usefulness. DT research has been conducted for over 12 years in several countries (Bentley, et al., 2017). A systematic review of 25 articles summarized intervention studies from Canada, USA, Australia, United Kingdom, Denmark, Portugal, and Japan found strong evidence of acceptability, high satisfaction and benefits for themselves and their families (Bentley, et al., 2017).

Interestingly, the benefits of DT can extend beyond the patient. As an example, three themes arose from interviews with 36 social work undergraduate students who performed DT with hospice patients. The three themes that arose from the social work students were, they felt "greater appreciation for life," "connection to family," and "service and legacy" (Bentley, et al., 2017).

Harvey Chochinov understood the value of invoking purpose and meaning for people who suffer with life limiting illnesses. Perceiving that dignity depends on the pursuit of purpose and meaning, in 2002, Chochinov designed DT to relieve psychosocial and spiritual distress

(Fitchette, et al., 2015) for patients with life limiting disease by offering patients an opportunity to reflect on issues that are important to them. The therapy provides patients an opportunity to recall and process experiences that matter most to them and that they want remembered (Fitchette, et al., 2015). The therapy protocol includes an interview with a medical professional. Responses to the interview are recorded and transcribed into a generativity document reviewed by the patient and bequeathed to loved ones in many cases.

Observing the potential synergy between DT's effect on patients and non-patients and the awareness enhancing functionality of heuristics, DT informs my work on a tool design for sparking purposes in life in community college students.

Dignity Therapy Protocol

Chochinov developed an intervention of 10 core questions (table 2.2) to guide an interview with individuals who are dying or who have life limiting disease. Mental health professionals are trained in the DT protocol to administer the intervention that is described as an opportunity and exercise to speak about issues that he or she feels are of most import and would like preserved. The DT session is audio recorded, transcribed, edited, and given back to the patient, who may give it to family members or friends. Patients can modify the document before it is shared with loved ones.

The Dignity Psychotherapy Interview Questions, which is framed by the Dignity Model of Palliative Care (Chochinov, 2005), is shown in table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Dignity Themes, Definitions, and Dignity-Therapy Implications

Dignity Theme	Definition	Dignity Therapy Implication
Generativity	The notion, that for some patients, dignity is intertwined with the sense that one's life has stood for something or has	Sessions are tape-recorded and transcribed, with an edited transcript or "generativity document" being returned to

	some influence transcendent of death.	the patient to bequeath to a friend or family member.
Continuity of Self	Being able to maintain a feeling that one's essence is intact despite advancing illness.	Patients are invited to speak to issues that are foundational to their sense of personhood or self.
Role Preservation	Being able to maintain a sense of identification with one or more previously held roles.	Patients are questioned about previous or currently held roles that may contribute to their core identity
Maintenance of Pride	An ability to sustain a sense of positive self-regard.	Providing opportunities to speak about accomplishments or achievements that engender a sense of pride
Hopefulness	Hopefulness relates to the ability to find or maintain a sense of meaning or purpose.	Patients are invited to engage in a therapeutic process intended to instill a sense of meaning and purpose
Aftermath Concerns	Worries or fears concerning the burden or challenges that their death will impose on others.	Inviting the patient to speak to issues that might prepare their loved ones for a future without them
Care Tenor	Refers to the attitude and manner with which others interact with the patient that may or may not promote dignity.	The tenor of dignity therapy is empathetic, nonjudgmental, encouraging, and respectful

To decrease suffering, enhance quality of life, and bolster a sense of meaning, purpose, and dignity, patients are offered an opportunity to address things that matter most to them guided by the 10 core interview questions below.

Table 2.2. Dignity Psychotherapy Interview Questions

- Tell me a little about your life history, particularly the parts that you either remember most, or think are the most important? When did you feel most alive?
- Are there specific things that you would want your family to know about you, and are there particular things you would want them to remember?
- What are the most important roles you have played in life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Why were they so important to you and what do you think you accomplished in those roles?
- What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of?
- Are there particular things that you feel still need to be said to your loved ones, or things that you would want to take the time to say once again?

- What are your hopes and dreams for your loved ones?
- What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, other (s)]?
- Are there words or perhaps even instructions you would like to offer your family, to help prepare them for the future?
- In creating this permanent record, are there other things that you would like included?

REFLECTION MATTERS

Reflection is a useful cognitive function and contemplative practice whereby our experiences are processed memories. Like a movie, when we reflect on experiences, we replay the past in our mind. This process is more than just a rerun of what happened or our interpretation of what occurred. Reflection is a means to make meaning of our memories. The sense we make of our experiences can inform our present and future thoughts and actions.

While reflection can be therapeutic and timely for end of life care, one does not have to suffer a life limiting disease to benefit from processing salient lived experiences. In fact, I argue that it is healthy to not wait until we are dying to do the things that DT encourages us to do: speak about issues important to us with loved ones, identify alignment between our values and our life purpose/s, and reflect on one's life history. Death and illness can sharpen focus and awareness of personally meaningful things. Is there any good reason to wait until an imminent state of dying or for health to significantly decline to acknowledge and/or enact a life worth living?

Below are only two examples from my lived experiences working in New York City community colleges for over a decade of two students reflecting and learning from their experiences.

Justin (pseudonym) is certain that he wants to pursue the Fine Arts as an academic degree program in the local community college. He loves museums and envisions himself in the lifelong career curating exhibitions. Yet, his mother is adamant that he must aspire for a “more valuable

degree” in Business Administration. As the only child, he feels accountable to his parents and heavily influenced by his mother’s direction about which academic program to pursue. He is academically astute and did well in all his college courses. In fact, he received various accolades for top performance in his class. Both he and his mother were pleased with his academic progress and excited for his bright future.

Then Justin entered the workforce upon graduation in a role of assistant manager of customer service for a successful clothing company. He was excited to be employed, earning above median salary for the field with medical and dental benefits. Certainly, his mother is proud of him and happy that her son has health insurance and retirement benefits.

Then, most of his joy came to halt when his mother’s health rapidly declined, and then she died unexpectedly. Amongst the many memories he shared with me, he said that he laments neglecting his creativity and aspiration for the Fine Arts. The Business degree was for his mother and “now she is not with us.” While he is grateful to be employed, he does not like the rigid nature of his job. He feels that he has made an error in pursuing a Business degree rather than a degree in the Fine Arts. Earning a new college degree is not a feasible option currently because his is the only source of household income.

Take another example of the college student who is an undeclared major because she was undecided on her academic goals. During her tenure at the college she attends a study-abroad experience for an elective course with the Department of Modern Languages. The capstone assignment for the course requires a 10-page written essay about what she learns and how she will apply the newly acquired knowledge. In writing the essay, she reflects on her study-abroad experiences and uncovers her buried passion for languages and communication as an adolescent. Having reconnected with her passion triggered by the salient out-of-classroom learning

experience and reflective assignment, she decides to pursue a degree in international communications.

Above we have two basic examples of college students reflecting on their lived experiences and sorting through the application of that information. One of my purposes in life is to nudge community college students, like the ones in the examples above, to make meaning from their experiences, cultivate their purpose/s in life, and live according to their core values. A first step in doing these things is to become aware of these ideas. Increasing awareness of constructs can be achieved with the use of heuristics.

AWARENESS MATTERS

Awareness is learning. When new information enters our consciousness, we have learned about something we did not have knowledge of previously. Awareness is the opposite of, and yet dialectically related to, ignorance. Often the result of informal learning, awareness can occur in any place and at any age. Consider the first time that you became aware of the construct of death and dying. This may have been when your beloved family pet died or through experiencing the decline in health of an aging family member. Through the experience of such awareness we learn about specific and associated concepts such as death, religion, health, age, love, pain, and so forth.

Awareness decreases cognitive load (McNight & Kashdan, 2009). When we become cognizant of useful information, we tend to use it repeatedly. Information that we are repeatedly exposed to becomes part of our knowledge structures and requires less cognitive effort to process in the working memory or to retrieve from the long-term memory. Thus, awareness reduces the demands on working memory and long-term memory. Consequently, established concepts and experiences help our working memory to understand and learn more challenging information.

Awareness advances human agency or our capacity to utilize resources (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009). We do not deliberately counteract structures, or elect to disregard them, without knowledge of their presence. To enact change with intent we must be aware of the matter to which we will devote energy. Said another way, we cannot know something that we do not yet know (Roth, 2007). Therefore, to come to know what we did not know empowers us to make informed decisions about how to interact with what we are cognizant of. Simply stated, awareness is empowering and facilitates decision making.

PURPOSE MATTERS

I think of purpose as a worldview or a framework for how we choose to interact with the world and live our lives. As researchers, we choose the frameworks through which to observe and interpret phenomena. Similarly, purpose can serve as a lens through which we choose to interpret the world, which in turn guides our behaviors and experiences. For example, a central motivating life aim of mine is to teach life skills to marginalized urban youth. Having an awareness of this purpose frames: my interaction with youth, my teaching style, the environment in which I choose to work, the partners with whom I choose to collaborate, and many other decisions. Thus, purpose is a lens through which we can recognize our values, a compass which guides us in a direction that makes sense to us, and fuel to sustain our energies as we move towards our targets.

Life purposes have the potential to focus our thoughts and intentions on major life targets. Not having purposes in life to pursue, or lacking the awareness of purposes in life, can result in experiencing a sense of "drift" (Damon, et al., 2003). An analogy for purposelessness is a rudderless boat -- it can float and will eventually arrive somewhere but has no specific destination. Another analogy helpful for understanding the construct of purpose in life is the Global Positioning System (GPS) technology used by people worldwide. The GPS is a tool that

locks in on our geographic location and helps us to navigate to a specific destination. It would be hard or nearly impossible to effectively use the GPS without plugging in a specific desired destination. Think of Uber or Lyft. Using GPS, we inform the drivers of vehicles using GPS technology where to pick us up and where we want to go. The destination in this analogy is like a purpose in life. Once we know what our desired destination is, we are more likely to arrive there.

Since purpose is directional and focuses our aspirations, then dialectically related and equally important is the “drift” described by William Damon, Jenni Menon and Kendall Bronk in their chapter *The Development of Purpose During Adolescence*. A self-determined pre-planned purpose is hard to come by early in life. First, we drift about exploring experiences to learn about our likes and dislikes, skills and challenges, before we can formulate a plan and acknowledge a life worth living.

Each new semester I encounter community college students completely perplexed about their purposes for learning. By the time they figure out a degree or career worthy of committing time, energy, and money to they have wasted precious energy and time. The Purposes in Life Heuristic is designed to help the student go below the surface of what to learn and get closer to the core of why we live. Knowing why we live, or to what we will dedicate our lives, is instructive for directing our motivations for learning. Using DT as a springboard, the Purposes in Life Heuristic is a tool to bring users’ awareness into focus on salient life experiences and long-term goals.

Table 2.3. Purposes in Life Heuristic (PsLH)

- Reflect on your life history, particularly the parts that you either remember most, or think are the most important? When do you feel most alive?
- Are there specific things that you would want your loved ones to know about you, and are there particular things you would want them to remember about you?
- What are the most important roles you have played in your life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Why are they so important to you, and what do you think you accomplished within those roles?
- What important roles do you look forward to in your life? Why are they so important to you?

- What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of?
- What are your hopes and dreams for the world beyond yourself?
- What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, siblings, other(s)]?
- What are your top two core values or principles that drive your behavior (e.g., peace, wealth, happiness, success, friendship, fame, authenticity, power, influence, justice, integrity, joy, love recognition, family, truth, wisdom, status, etc.)?
- Complete the following statement for each life domain:
 - Currently my intellectual purpose/s are...
 - Currently my physical purpose/s are ...
 - Currently my environmental purpose/s are ...
 - Currently my emotional purpose/s are ...
 - Currently my spiritual purpose/s are ...
 - Currently my social purpose/s are ...
 - Currently my financial purpose/s are ...

WHY COMMUNITY COLLEGES?

One of my purposes in life is to encourage people to make meaning of their experiences and to live according to their core values and purpose/s in life. Heuristics are intervention tools designed for the purpose of illuminating concepts and nudging behavior in the recipient. It is clear to me that having a sense of significance in life is important for our psycho-behavioral wellbeing. According to my research nearly 3 million community college students in the United States may have not developed a clear purpose in life. It is worth investigating whether the Life Purposes Heuristic, informed by Dignity Therapy, would be a helpful tool for community college students to recollect meaningful experiences and identify life purposes.

In this chapter, I provide a rationale developing a Life Purposes heuristic for students at an urban public community college that is informed by the Dignity Therapy. I provide an overview about both heuristics as an intervention and Dignity Therapy. Finally, a draft LPSh is included for the readers' review.

CHAPTER 3

THE LIFE PURPOSES HEURISTIC

In chapter 2, I present a rationale for designing a life purposes heuristic informed by Dignity Therapy. In this chapter I document my reflexive social inquiry using the Life Purposes Heuristic (LPsH) with a community college student. The LPsH is designed with the intention that the student will reflect on her decisions and associated reasons for her determinations. Enacting reflexive practices increase awareness of practices that one may not be aware of and allow for modification of ontologies. The goal of the heuristic intervention is to afford improvement both to the individual and social life. The Life Purposes Heuristic LPsH (Table 3.1) is comprised of eight characteristics borrowed primarily from the Dignity Psychotherapy Interview Questions protocol (Table 3.2). The LPsH is designed to nudge us towards reflexivity to raise awareness about meaningful experiences and purposes in life.

Table 3.1. Life Purposes Heuristic

- Reflect on your life history, particularly the parts that you either remember most, or think are the most important? When did you feel most alive?
- Are there specific things that you would want your loved ones to know about you, and are there particular things you would want them to remember about you?
- What are the most important roles you have played in your life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Why are they so important to you, and what do you think you accomplished within those roles?
- What important roles do you look forward to in your life? Why are they so important to you?
- What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of?
- What are your hopes and dreams for the world beyond yourself?
- What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, siblings, other(s)]?
- What are your top two core values or principles that drive your behavior (e.g., peace, wealth, happiness, success, friendship, fame, authenticity, power, influence, justice, integrity, joy, love recognition, family, truth, wisdom, status, etc.)?

Table 3.2. Dignity Psychotherapy Interview Questions

- Tell me a little about your life history; particularly the parts that you either remember most, or think are the most important? When did you feel most alive?
- Are there specific things that you would want your family to know about you, and are there particular things you would want them to remember?
- What are the most important roles you have played in life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Why were they so important to you and what do you think you accomplished in those roles?
- What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of?
- Are there particular things that you feel still need to be said to your loved ones, or things that you would want to take the time to say once again?
- What are your hopes and dreams for your loved ones?
- What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, other (s)]?
- Are there words or perhaps even instructions you would like to offer your family, to help prepare them for the future?
- In creating this permanent record, are there other things that you would like included?

SUBJECT OR COLLABORATOR?

Emma (pseudonym) was as eager to learn about the research process as she was interested in being a participant in the Life Purposes Heuristic study. From the onset, during the consent to participate phase, Emma and I were collaborators – she was not a subject for me to study.

Instead, following the Authentic Inquiry framework for research, we were both embarking on a learning opportunity through which both of our ontologies are likely to change. She stated that she was pleased to participate in the study and asked a few clarifying questions. Specifically, she asked was there anything special to do before or after answering the questions and did she have to respond to each of the eight characteristics?

I invited Emma to engage in the process of reflecting on the prompts and encouraged her to try to be as thorough in her responses as possible. I informed Emma that there is not a word count, language, grammar or punctuation needed - there are no right or wrong responses. Instead, answer as many questions as you can, I requested. Certainly, read every question, but if you find

that you are unable to respond to a question indicate “No Response” in the space following the question. It is imperative to set aside quiet time to focus on each question and then to reply thoroughly and honestly.

On day three, after providing the study overview to Emma, she informed me that she completed the LPsH and was ready to share her reactions to the characteristics with me. Emma and I had a cogenerative dialogue on the day she completed the heuristic then again twelve days from the first date she completed and submitted her responses to the characteristics. Four themes emerged from our conversations: **1)** salient characteristic that evoked change, **2)** salient characteristics that increased awareness, **3)** characteristics that were not salient, **4)** a characteristic that was salient and rejected.

Salient characteristic that evoked change

Emma wrote the longest reaction (582 words) to the one characteristic she stated was the most salient for her. That characteristic is:

- What are the most important roles you have played in your life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Why are they so important to you, and what do you think you accomplished within those roles?

When I asked Emma why she identified the above characteristic as salient, she said:

I am a multifaceted person with more than one role in life. This reminds me that I can do more than one thing. I don't think about it at all because I am always focused on the next thing, but this question helped me to realize that I have increased value for myself and for others. I feel more significant in a way that is not materialistic. I have been a great person, but I have not given myself credit. I must give myself credit.

Salient characteristics that increased awareness

Emma identified several characteristics as important and thought provoking. She stated that the below two characteristics were important for several reasons. Specifically, she said, “This helps

remind me to feel like I don't have to live a life of restrictions. My history and accomplishments make me feel self-confident and proud."

- Reflect on your life history, particularly the parts that you either remember most, or think are the most important? When do you feel most alive?
- What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of?

Characteristics that were not salient

Emma stated that two characteristics were least beneficial to her. In fact, she did not respond to the first of the two below characteristics. She was adamant in her reasons for why the two characteristics were not salient for her. She stated, "I don't want to define myself according to a future role. Constraining myself to a future role is limiting."

- What important roles do you look forward to in your life? Why are they so important to you?
- What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, siblings, other(s)]?

Characteristic that was salient and rejected

By far, Emma's most animated emotional action in which she physically slapped both her thighs with both hands and expressed frustration in a loud voice was in response to the characteristic:

- What are your hopes and dreams for the world beyond yourself?

The following is an excerpt of the cogenerative dialogue between Emma and me. I analyze this portion of the conversation because of how distinct it is from the other patterns of speech during the same conversation. During this period of conversation, Emma exhibits intensified voice prosody, one long pause in speech, language that expressed anger, and physical action of simultaneous slamming both open hands down against both of her thighs.

- Turn 1 (Manny) Is there anything else you think is worth noting, anything that resonates, about any of the characteristics, positive or otherwise?
- Turn 2 (Emma) My hopes and dreams are...what are your hopes and dreams for the world beyond yourself? It just feels like it's idealistic. Like too...fine I can have hopes and dreams, but it feels like such a big statement. Hopes and dreams almost feels like accomplishments that you can't reach. For instance, what are my hopes and dreams: a world with no wars, a world with no suffering and diseases, a world in which there is empathy and consideration for each other. You know, those are my hopes and dreams but realistically is this going to happen? Can I achieve it? So, it kind of pisses me off because it is too idealistic.
- Turn 3 (Manny) Your hopes and dreams are too idealistic?
- Turn 4 (Emma) No. Yes! Cause when the question is asked what are the hopes and dreams beyond yourself, maybe it's just me, I feel like my hopes and dreams are so big that then when I think about it; it makes me feel like I am back to square one. You know in one breadth I feel like I've achieved so much and then in the other I feel like my hopes and dreams are so big that I haven't done anything, and that life is too short.

Long silent pause of 33 seconds

- Turn 5 (Emma) What does this all mean to you?

As a researcher informed by the Authentic Inquiry framework, I know that to improve practice we take notice of and learn from what is different. Emma's reaction to the Hopes and Dreams characteristic was clearly distinct from the rest of our discussion. In her own words Emma was upset "...it kind of pisses me off..." she said. Emma stated, "...in one breath I feel like I've achieved so much and then in the other I feel like my hopes and dreams are so big that I haven't done anything..."

Clearly Emma is trying to reconcile her aspirations with what she has accomplished. She does not see her hopes as being in alignment with her reality. This conflict causes anxiety and frustration that is disruptive to her motivation to act in accord with her values.

I studied the audio recording and reviewed her written reactions to the LPsH. Guided by tactical authenticity of authentic inquiry, I intentionally intervened in the moment that I learned

that new information could potentially be beneficial to Emma. I reviewed Emma's recorded responses to our cogen and found alignment between the roles she stated are important in her life (caregiver to grandparent, mentor, wife, professional) with most of her responses to the hopes and dreams characteristic. In fact, her life roles map on to 6 of 8 of her hopes and dreams. This is salient because while Emma expressed anger and frustration about how unrealistic it is that she can realize her hopes and dreams, I found that she has unknowingly been enacting or living her hopes and dreams.

For example, the important actions of taking care of her grandfather aligns with Emma's following hopes and dreams:

- A world with no longer suffering and diseases
- A world in which we respect our differences (religious, sexual, political, etc.) and value life
- A world in which there is empathy and consideration towards each other
- A world in which we value more service to others than the "5 min fame"
- A world in which people have enough food, a roof over their heads, running water and electricity

When I showed Emma the above evidence of how she has been unwittingly pursuing many of her hopes and dreams she said, "Damn I really am doing something to live my purpose. I am doing it. I am doing it at a smaller scale, but I am doing it. It is empowering. It's like we live in these paradigms that we can't see beyond."

Emma's detailed replies to the LPsH are included below for review. Her responses show that the LPsH tool enhanced reflection on meaningful life experiences and identification of life purposes for Emma. There are two evident changes in Emma's ontologies, one from engaging with the heuristic and the other one resulting from the cogen with the researcher.

This study shows examples of enacting authentic inquiry as a framework for research. For example, guided by tactical authenticity of authentic inquiry, it was ethical for me to intentionally shift gears during the study from observation and data gathering to provide information to Emma that ameliorated distress in that moment.

Many scholars in the CUNY urban education Ph.D. program, learning sciences track use authentic inquiry to frame their research. Leah Denise Pride (2018) uses authentic inquiry to unpack emotions and “thorny issues” within teaching and learning; Corinna Brathwaite (2018) researches emotionally adaptive pedagogy; Ernest Andre Poole (2019) studies complimentary practices of health and wellness and Martin S. Wilson’s (2019) dialogue with NYC mathematics teachers are all guided by theoretical and methodological framework of authentic inquiry to improve both practices and theory.

LIFE PURPOSES HEURISTIC – EMMA’S RESPONSES

- Reflect on your life history, particularly the parts that you either remember most, or think are the most important? When do you feel most alive?

I was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. At the age of 11, my mother decided to uplift the family and move us to a new life in the beautiful island of Puerto Rico so that she, my brothers and I could be close to our elderly grandparents. I remember most the struggle of moving to a new country, learning a new language (Spanish) and the struggle of not being accepted by our kin because we were “the Americanos.” What I did not know at the time was that all of those born in the island as well as in the U.S. mainland are Americans. I was not accepted by many of my classmates and felt that many times I did not have the support of the teachers because they would obligate me to standup in front of the class and give a 3-minute presentation on a recent world event in Spanish when at the time I was barely able to form full sentences in Spanish.

I worked hard to learn the language and adapt to my new reality. As a result, I ended up graduating from middle and high school at the top of my class. I learned that hard work and sacrifice pays off. I learned that instant gratification does not generally result in the best results and/or fulfillment.

I feel most alive when I learn something new, I apply that knowledge to advance my personal and career aspirations and share my personal and professional knowledge to support others recognize that they are valuable and have a wealth of potential.

- Are there specific things that you would want your loved ones to know about you, and are there particular things you would want them to remember about you?

No response

- What are the most important roles you have played in your life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Why are they so important to you, and what do you think you accomplished within those roles?

Caretaker of my grandfather—at the age of 18 while other teenagers' priorities were dating, going to parties, having fun, living without worries I was left to take care of my elderly grandfather. I had limited physical, mental and emotional freedom due to the nature of caring for an elderly person. For 9 years, I lived with constant worry. At the time, I resented not being able to “live and enjoy my life and longed to live without worries or cares. In retrospect, if given the opportunity to choose between living the life of a “normal teenager” without the worries and sacrifices of carrying for my grandfather I would not choose differently. My role as a young caregiver turned me into a resilient, caring, nurturing, empathetic and self-less person. I also learned gratitude. My grandfather and grandmother gave us so much love, cared for and nurtured us. In their old age, it was my turn to do the same. This experience allowed me to see the importance of looking beyond oneself as well as finding ways to express gratitude for what others have done for one. I learned the importance of being flexible and understand that sometimes roles are reversed and that one needs to gather strength and courage to push forward.

Wife—This has been the most important role of my life. I believe that being around my grandparents and caring for my grandfather prepared me for this role. I am blessed because so many folks in this lifetime do not experience or feel true, deep love for a significant other. This role pushes me every day to strive to do better to be better. I had not thought about how being in a loving relationship has not only been an amazing journey but contributes significantly to making a lasting mark / legacy in this world. Through the love I give my husband, I believe it makes both of us a better person which in turn others can benefit from. “Full your cup until it overflows”

Advisor and mentor for my family & close friends—I find fulfillment, purpose and joy in giving advice, coaching, encouraging and helping others see their value and potential. I feel that I need to live a legacy and that this is a wonderful way to do so. By helping someone, I am not only impacting their life but potentially also impacting the lives of those closest to them.

Professional Role—One of my top values is adding value / making a difference. I take advantage of the opportunity to seek for ways to make solid contributions in my professional roles. Most of us spend more time at work than what we do at home or with our family and loved ones. I take advantage of opportunities that take me out of my comfort zone. I grow and help others grow. I recognize that success is something that I attract by the person that I become. I go into each new day with a growth mindset. I also use my job as an opportunity to impact the lives of junior/less seasoned professionals.

These roles are tremendously significant to me because this is how I feel that I live beyond myself. I look to make a difference and impact the lives of others in positive ways. These roles help me feel fulfilled and recognize that I already have made this world a better place and that I still can continue to do so.

- What important roles do you look forward to in your life? Why are they so important to you?

No response

- What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of?

My most important accomplishment is one that is outside of a classroom and professional setting. It is the accomplishment of personal development. Of recognizing self-limiting beliefs and deconstructing paradigms as these have resulted in releasing me from unwarranted fear and self-doubt. Building my personal development arsenal has resulted in my foundation of being strong and now I build upon a strong foundation and feel that I am moving forward in life as a productive person. I feel most proud of the life that I have lived. I would have never thought that I feel so proud of my life.

- What are your hopes and dreams for the world beyond yourself?

A world with no wars

A world with no long-suffering diseases

A world in which we respect our differences (religious, sexual, political, etc.) and value life

A world in which there is empathy and consideration towards each other

A world in which we value more service to others than the “5 min fame”

A world in which people have enough food, a roof over their heads, running water and electricity

A world in which everyone has the opportunity to be educated

A world in which politicians truly care for the interest of the people

- What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, siblings, other(s)]?

Every day of your life strive and work towards improving your life and that of others.

This is our legacy. Think beyond yourself. Think of what you want your legacy to be. We must get back up when facing adversity.

- What are your top two core values or principles that drive your behavior (e.g., peace, wealth, happiness, success, friendship, fame, authenticity, power, influence, justice, integrity, joy, love recognition, family, truth, wisdom, status, etc.)?

Love, Success, Security

CHAPTER 4

PURPOSE IN LIFE, ANXIETY AND SUCCESS

COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS NOT A BREEZE...

The anxiety of being a college student and associated stressors, including funding school, passing courses, navigating the higher education system, are speed bumps to post-secondary education success. A hodgepodge of emotion is evoked by various transitions in life (e.g., emerging adulthood, romantic relationships, unfamiliar environment). Still, studies have shown that reflecting on one's purposes in life can buffer against the psychological and physiological effects of stress (Bronk, 2011). Looking forward to something that gives life significance can kick-start motivation and enhance focus on goal attainment which in turn has psychobiological health benefits and a protective effect on both our mind and body against stressors. The motivating effects of purposes are evident in everyday life. Somehow our struggles become a little more tolerable when there is a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel or knowing that a reward awaits us for exerting our best effort.

College students, regardless of age, gender, or nationality, are often confronted with challenging "big life" questions about identity, career, and definitions of success (Nash, 2009). Societal pressure to determine one's vocation often manifests during the college years – this is often the place and the time to decide on a career and prepare for the rest of your life. Organizing the remainder of your life is an intimidating task for anyone including many community college students whose attention to academics contends with financial and familial obligations. Students' competing needs coupled with concern for the long-term implications of their present decisions and actions are understandably anxiety provoking. It is not uncommon for many college students

to reflect on and struggle to answer a version of the following questions: Which academic program is right for me? Will my degree result in a good job? What career should I pursue? Will I disappoint my loved ones for not studying the major that they prefer and advised me to follow? How can I earn a good salary working in a job that helps improve the world? How do I pay for school? Can I balance work, school, family and a social life?

My office is heavily trafficked with students often looking for coaching, mentoring and guidance concerning dilemmas in their personal and academic lives. Many students, early in their college tenure, naively plan to detach their academic lives from their out-of-classroom problems as if the fields of social life cannot interpenetrate with the academic experience. Regrettably, college students' personal and financial worries often manifest as distraction from the academic learning environment (Tinto, 2017).

This study began unofficially when I listened radically (Tobin, 2012), to a student who sought my guidance. We were scheduled to discuss the college transfer process and her general next steps after graduating from community college. Suspending judgment of her decisions and actions, I endeavored to be empathetic by seeing the student's issue through her lens. This is a student I knew well. She was on-track to graduate at the end of the current term; regrettably, the student failed the one class she needed to complete the degree requirements for her academic program. Interestingly, rather than expressing disappointment she seemed content to have to remain at the community college for an additional semester and repeat the course she failed.

I was fascinated by her nonchalance to not graduating as scheduled. I paid attention to how she rationalized her indifference about failing to complete graduation requirements. Eventually she expressed relief to not advance because she needed an "...extra semester to figure

out what to do with her life.” She stated that she wished to do something big and important to change the world but didn’t know what it would be. “I want to love my job, be dedicated to it all day long, not just run out at five o’clock” she said. This student’s circumstances, and those of many others like her, have inspired my writing and research in this chapter and throughout other sections in this dissertation. A theme that runs through this manuscript is my focus on community college students who explicitly want to increase their sense of purpose but do not know how to do so.

START THE STUDY

Adhering to the authenticity criteria, research ought to benefit all involved including study recipients, the researcher, those whose voices are not privileged, and the institution. Therefore, I have adopted authentic inquiry as an overarching framework for this study (Tobin, 2013). My expectation is to learn from the study participants and offer a reflexive intervention to illuminate and foster concepts like purpose in life and meaning.

Enacting radical listening was an important first step for understanding and supporting the community college students where I worked, but I also wanted to offer them an intervention to help ameliorate the apparent distress and uncertainty students expressed about their lives. Designing a Purpose in Life Heuristic (PiLH) seemed like the ideal tool for my purposes – heuristics are instruments designed to include characteristics that enhance awareness of constructs potentially beneficial to others and salient in our research (Powietrzyńska, 2014). To design the PiLH, I modified the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), a 10-question psychometric tool designed by Steger, et al. (2006) to gauge presence of meaning and pursuit of purpose. The choice to modify the MLQ (Table 4.1) was easy for me as it was validated (Steger, et al., 2006) for tapping the characteristics I planned to illuminate for college students: meaning

in life and purpose in life. The PiLH is a short 5 statement tool designed to tap two characteristics - purpose and meaning in life (Table 4.1.).

Table 4.1. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire and The Purpose in Life Heuristic

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire	The Purpose in Life Heuristic
<p><i>MLQ Please take a moment to think about what makes your life feel important to you. Please respond to the following statements as truthfully and accurately as you can, and please remember that these are very subjective questions and that there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer according to the scale below:</i></p> <p><i>Absolutely True 1 --- Absolutely Untrue 7</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1. I understand my life's meaning.</i> <i>2. I am looking forward to something that makes my life feel meaningful.</i> <i>3. I am always looking to find my life's purpose.</i> <i>4. My life has a clear sense of purpose.</i> <i>5. I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.</i> <i>6. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.</i> <i>7. I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.</i> <i>8. I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.</i> <i>9. My life has no clear purpose.</i> <i>10. I am searching for meaning in my life.</i> <p><i>MLQ syntax to create Presence and Search subscales:</i></p> <p><i>Presence: 1, 4, 5, 6, & 9 (reverse-coded)</i></p> <p><i>Search: 2, 3, 7, 8 & 10</i></p> <p><i>The copyright for this scale is owned by the University of Minnesota. The questionnaire is intended for free use in research and clinical applications. Please contact Michael S. Steger prior to any such noncommercial use. This questionnaire may not be used for commercial purposes.</i></p>	<p><i>For each statement circle the numeral that best reflects your current state of mindfulness with purpose in life. As necessary provide contextual information that applies to your ratings.</i></p> <p>1. I feel my life has a clear sense of purpose.</p> <p>5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue</p> <p>Comments:</p> <p>2. I am looking for something that makes my life meaningful.</p> <p>5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue</p> <p>Comments:</p> <p>3. I have a clear sense of what makes my life meaningful.</p> <p>5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue</p> <p>Comments:</p> <p>4. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.</p> <p>5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue</p> <p>Comments:</p> <p>5. I have discovered the right career for me.</p> <p>5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue</p> <p>Comments:</p>

Sometimes referred to as shapeshifters, heuristics can take various forms. In this study, respondents to the PiLH provide a numerical rating, much like a Likert scale, used primarily to

stimulate reflexivity of the named characteristics. Additionally, there are fields for respondents to write comments to contextualize their ratings.

I distributed the PiLH to 22 students. Every student participant was required to be a matriculated student at the college study site. Participants were selected intentionally for their distinction from the previously identified student to capture polyphonia and polysemia - the diverse voices and multiple experiences of the students (Bleier, 2018). The selection variables were age, major, graduation year, gender, ethnicity and race. To demonstrate, the first student participant was a freshman, male Latino majoring in education. In recognizing difference as a resource, the next student was selected intentionally to be unlike the first student – college senior, female white, majoring in engineering. So forth and so on study participants were serially invited to respond to the PiLH. Each student completed the heuristic in 15 minutes or less. Immediately following completion of the heuristic-questionnaire, I engaged 10 student respondents in brief cogenerative dialogues (Bayne, 2013) while enacting analyses of in-the-moment facial expression of emotion (Davidson, 2010).

A critical pedagogical methodology and method, cogenerative dialogues (cogens) are reflective conversations amongst selected participants used to coteach, construct knowledge and catalyze change (Bayne, 2013). Cogens are not restricted to any particular field like the classroom. The conversations mediate the collaborative generation of knowledge and culture in any space where any number of participants are equal contributors and likewise affirmed for their participation. Founded by Tobin and Roth at the University of Pennsylvania, cogenerative dialogue is a commonly used method for science education research. Science education scholars leading the way with cogenerative dialogues include Gillian Bayne and Chris Emdin. Several budding researchers apply cogens to their research as well. Martin S. Wilson (2019) uses cogens

to learn with and from mathematics teachers in urban NYC schools. Carol A. Woodburn-McDonald (2018) applies cogens to catalyze change in an urban algebra high school class.

I engaged in six separate cogens, with 10 of the 22 students immediately after they completed the heuristic. First, I had a brief cogen with a group of four students in the Atrium of the College, then I had one-on-one cogens with four students in the College Library, and finally I had a cogen with two students in my office. For each of the six cogens I commenced with the question: What reactions did this exercise evoke in you? The question is deliberately broad to learn from difference and allow for the research to be emergent and contingent on the students' experiences rather than collecting narrow responses that can be reductive. After asking each question, I listened intently for both similar responses and for where there was variance. Every encounter was interesting.

One student caught my interest immediately - sitting in my office she mumbled the word, "depressing." Her low, nearly indistinguishable, single word statement was an event that instantly captured my attention. We engaged in a cogenerative dialogue after she completed the PiLH.

Serenity (pseudonym) is an adult female student enrolled at the urban community college for a 7th semester or 3 1/2 years. During every term she has struggled to pass developmental mathematics courses. Initially, she thought the problem was test-anxiety or that she just was not good at math. Then, recently diagnosed with dyscalculia, she learns and processes mathematical operations and concepts differently than the general population. Serenity is a part-time student and employed full-time - an unrelenting professional who works more than 35- hours every week. She has two children both school aged younger than 11 years of age - one boy and one

girl. They wake up at 5:30 a.m. each weekday before the 1-hour subway ride in NYC during rush-hour, followed by a half mile walk to the kids' school, then mom is off on a 20-minute Uber ride to work. Returning home each evening is a reverse mission of the daytime production. What to cook for the week that is nutritious for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the kids, keeping the home organized, getting to and from work and getting the job done daily is a performance that requires mental, spiritual, and emotional fortitude. Each day is a roller-coaster of self-esteem dips and highs. To calm the trauma of a decade of drama, she indulges in libations often after work.

Serenity is representative of many urban public community college students: 56% of community college students are women; 68% of students beginning public two-year colleges took one or more remedial course; 72% of part-time community college students work (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019).

A FEW SURPRISES...

I set out to explore what can be learned from students who engage with constructs of meaning and purpose in life mediated by a PiLH.

I found that nearly every student in this study was looking for something to make their lives meaningful. In fact, 19 of the 22 students responded with a high ranking (either very true or true) to the characteristic that reads: *I am looking for something that makes my life meaningful*. Additionally, the reactions of most students with whom I had cogens were that of intense negative emotions. Expressed negative emotions was unexpected - nine out of the ten students expressed negative emotions in response to the heuristic-questionnaire. Engaging in the process of discovering their respective meaning and/or purpose in life elicited discomfort for many of the

community college students in this study. The three core emotions evoked by reflecting on meaning and purpose in life using the PiLH were sadness, surprise and anxiety. Following are utterances the student respondents shared with me during cogen or wrote on the PiLH tool.

- “Do you think I’m crazy?”
- “It brought back bad experiences from the past”
- “Depressing”
- “It made me question what I want”
- “I like to look deep”
- “I don’t know how to answer”
- “I’m still undecided what to do with the future but hopefully I’ll get there”
- “Find the right career, yeah right, I wish”

It was clear that students were experiencing discomfort, but uncertain is why there were intense negative emotions consistently evoked in many student respondents when exposed to the PiLH. Larissa Rainey’s (2014) capstone project at the University of Pennsylvania titled, *The search for purpose in life: An exploration of purpose, the search process, and purpose anxiety* introduced purpose anxiety as a new construct in the purpose literature. Rainey explores the effects of the search for purpose and finds that the search process is commonly anxiety provoking for many American adults. Rainey offers preliminary support for four factors correlated with purpose anxiety, “the perception that purpose is a choice, a tendency toward pessimism, a lack of self-knowledge, and the belief that language is limited all contribute to purpose anxiety in modern American society.” (Rainey, p. 83)

After reflecting on the heuristic characteristics, examining students’ verbal and written responses, and following the theory of passivity (Roth, 2007), I have one hypothesis why many of the respondents expressed anxiety when reacting to the to the five PiLH characteristics. Effectively, asking students to react to the PiLH was a request to take on the impossible task of expressing knowledge about something that they did not know. Two students responding

separately wrote: “I don’t know how to answer” and “I’m still undecided what to do with the future, but hopefully I’ll get there.” Not only are purpose and meaning constructs nebulous, intangible and complicated, but if someone has not learned their life purposes how could they report what they are? Those who exemplified *purpose anxiety* did not know their purposes. If they were aware of their purposes in life, they would have simply shared it.

How can I (the learner) intend to know something I do not yet know and therefore cannot make it the object of my intention to learn? Christopher Columbus could not intend to discover (know, know about) the Americas prior to having discovered (come to know about) the Americas. (Roth, p. 6)

The challenges I faced with evoking purpose anxiety using the PiLH was instructive for the development of my next heuristic (see chapters 2 and 3). I learned from students’ reactions to the PiLH that to improve comprehension of the characteristics, I had to describe the associated constructs and their component concepts. In other words, rather than the PiLH intervention characteristic reading, *I have a clear sense of what makes my life meaningful* the characteristic for the revised LPsH reads: *What are the most important roles you have played in your life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)?* Another difference with version 2 of the intervention is that the characteristics are reflective questions, rather than declarative statements.

CHAPTER 5

REFRAME AND CUSHION ADVERSITY

In this chapter I look to cognitive behavioral theory, polyvagal theory and mindfulness to interpret two students' academic and life experiences. Reframing and Cushioning are two constructs that emerged from the cogenerative dialogues with both students. I have translated this chapter into standard Spanish language to expand potential readership for the pragmatic applications of the concepts highlighted in this text.

I am often eager to learn from the college students I work hard to teach and support. This chapter is inspired by lessons of life that I gathered from two students in their junior year who I met while they were volunteering for an orientation to college for the incoming class. College friends, Iris and Betty (pseudonyms), had inquiries about the food pantry at the College. Iris introduced herself to me as an undocumented resident of the United States, mother of two special needs children, and soldier against sexual abuse, living in a shelter on a total monthly household income of less than \$900 for a family of four. Betty introduced herself as a liberal art major and mother of one beautiful boy.

Despite personal challenges, Iris is undoubtedly focused on academic success more so than many other students at the College. For both Iris and Betty, rate of academic progress, cumulative grade point average, and engagement with the College's co-curricular offerings are all well above average. Also, Iris and Betty are vigorous self-advocates and community organizers.

Immediately, I felt compassion for Iris and an urgent desire to support her. I escorted the friends to the food pantry at the College which was on the side of campus opposite from where we were. As we walked across campus, I engaged the students in a cogenerative

dialogue (Bayne, 2012) through which we collectively generated information that expanded our shared and respective knowledge.

Interested in how each student successfully manages multiple priorities that seemingly conflict with one another, I inquired, how is it that they maintain focus, engagement, and productivity? What I construed as burdens in life for Iris, she described differently. Following is an extract of our cogenerative dialogue:

Turn 1 - **Manny:** Thank you for sharing your experiences with me. You seem focused, engaged, and productive despite real challenges. And you are volunteering at the college today. How do you do it all?

Turn 2 - **Iris:** I have the blessings of suffering...

Turn 3 - **Iris:** ...it gives me challenges to solve and reasons to live.

Turn 4 - **Iris:** I am focused on helping marginalized women and children in homeless shelters. I have other goals in life as well for my family and my health.

Turn 5 - **Betty:** [I] block out the noise every day. I love myself too much to let the drama mess with me. I respect it, but I don't get trapped and ruminate. [I] put on my headphones and focus on where I'm going, and I just get there.

REFRAMING ADVERSITY

In making meaning of Iris's statements, it resonates that there can be constructive aspects to the suffering that we experience in life. Adversity, like failure, points us in the right direction. As with dilemmas, we learn through the process of elimination that probabilities for correct answers increase with the more wrong choices we select. Therefore, choosing incorrectly is not always flawed when the outcome is learning to eliminate erroneous options.

Adversity is a path to empathy. No one can comprehend the grief associated with losing a child other than another parent who has also had that treacherous experience. The pain of traumatic events in life can unlock a compassion in us for others who are suffering.

When we comprehend intimately the experiences of the other, there is potential for connection and emotional bond that may develop from the common experience.

Resolving Thorny Issues (Alexakos, et al., 2016) that affect us can be an onramp to the development of purposes in life. Iris's career aspiration to support marginalized women and children is based on her lived experiences. Our life purposes may be veiled by pain, struggle, and/or suffering. Reasons for living may be found on the other side of distress. Often Purposes are born from our interactions with the inevitable trials that we encounter. Victor Frankl, is the author of the seminal book titled, *Man's Search for Meaning* written in 1945. Frankl wrote the manuscript for his autobiographical book in nine days after surviving three years of torture as a concentration camp prisoner during WWII. Frankl conveys in graphic detail that "...life holds potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable one." (preface to the 1984 edition, p. 16).

Adversity | Solution Dialectic

Adversity can spark the process of creating solutions which in turn can be a direct route to purposeful living. Like Iris there are millions of people for whom solving hardships is a springboard to purposes in life. Throughout all of history, difficulty inspires solutions. Since the beginning of civilization, the manipulation of fire and the creation of the wheel were developed to resolve hardship. Industry, including the field of Medicine, has many excellent examples of the interplay between solutions and adversity. For example, in the 1940s antibiotics (potential solution) became widely available to counteract bacterial infections (adversity) (Levy, 1998). Invasive surgeries (potential solutions) are advanced to treat a

litany of ailments (adversity). Throughout the world, and in our own lives, we are met with myriad of large and small challenges that require our attention and action.

In many instances we find that adversity and solutions exist as a dialectic (Tobin & Roth, 2006). Said another way, adversity and solutions are individual constructs that have a pure co-relationship with one another. Whether for our personal challenges or with problems in the world beyond the self, adversities are signposts to solutions. We can choose to be intentional with agentic actions to counter our respective difficulties and those in our environments. In this way, our purposeful behavior to right the wrongs for our self and for others can translate into a life worth living.

Both Iris and Betty intuitively distinguished and applied success and persistence strategies in and out of the college setting. They explained to me in laymen terms their strategies for pursuing goals despite adversity. Their tactics are not unskillful, however – their practices are found to be effective in the research on complementary approaches to wellness. In this section I interpret what Iris and Betty apply instinctively to adversity and align it with the research on wellness.

Table 5.1. Laymen expression with the associated wellness construct.

Laymen Expression	Associated Wellness Construct
“I block out the noise every day. I respect it but don’t get trapped and ruminate.” “[I] put on my headphones and focus on where I’m going and just get there.”	Awareness, Mindfulness
“I have the blessings of suffering...” “I love myself too much to let the drama mess with me”	Cognitive reframing, Polyvagal Theory
“It gives me challenges to solve and reasons to live. I am focused on helping marginalized women and children in homeless shelters.”	Life Purposes, Positive Affect

Cognitive Reframing

Iris's reframing of adversity is notable. I was intrigued that she described suffering as blessings. While Iris acknowledged that she has weighty difficulties in life, she receives the challenges as *opportunities for developing solutions*. In other words, for Iris poverty and sexual abuse are not only reasons to suffer, they are pain to resolve and her reasons to live. Cognitive reframing or restructuring is a technique used by Cognitive Behavioral Therapists (CBT) to alleviate anxiety and other psychosocial disorders (Shurick, et al., 2012).

Mindfulness

On the surface, it can seem that Betty expressed avoidance from the potential for turmoil in her life when she said: "I block out the noise every day. I respect it but don't get stuck and ruminate." "[I] put on my headphones and focus on where I'm going and just get there." Conversely, Betty exemplifies essential qualities of mindful attention. Her explicit determination to not get stuck or ruminate exemplifies an awareness of, yet not a fixation on, the moments she describes as possible drama. Whereas, listening to music might indicate to the outsider an attempt to be disconnected from reality, headphones and music are tools Betty uses to create a focused mental environment to concentrate her senses, thoughts and emotions in the direction of her choosing. The act of blocking out the noise *every day* indicates a daily acknowledgement of her environment and of recognition of herself in those spaces. Hence, Betty is intuitively enacting mindfulness and practicing self-care by guiding her attention and focusing her willpower to reframe the lens on potential anxiety provoking experiences (Khng, 2018).

Polyvagal Theory

During our cogenerative dialogue, Iris said, she is the recipient of "...the blessings of suffering..." And Betty said, "I love myself too much to let the drama mess with me." The human mind and body are engaged with the external and internal environments at a primitive, biological and subconscious level. As such, the threat of harm, including suffering or drama described by the two students, activates our autonomic nervous system to release adrenaline and compel our bodies to either escape the circumstance or to shut down (Lucas, et al., 2018). Alternatively, suffering reframed as blessings and rejection of disorder as an act of self-love, in the ways that Iris and Betty have done likewise has effects on the nervous system that can support feelings of safety and calm. In my observation, both students via the action of reframing adversity, successfully steered the autonomic nervous system away from reacting to the neuroception (Porges & Dana, 2018) of danger.

Envisioning adversity as constructive is not a basic task. Human brains are hard wired to seek pleasure and to avoid pain. Still, pain is a needed sensation for our survival (Zylla, et al., 2017). In its most basic form, pain is an indicator that something is wrong, and we need to return to homeostasis. Along with reframing adversity, positive affect is used as protective buffers from the psycho-emotional strain of misfortune.

CUSHIONING EFFECT

One way to manage distress is to be proactive during relatively calm times. Everyone will be confronted by hard times sooner or later. Accordingly, building up a reserve of positive psycho-emotional wellness prior to challenges may have a cushioning or protective effect (Hanssen, et al., 2017). This concept is no different from funding an emergency account, exercising to build muscle to maintain strength in the future, and having insurance for your

health, home and vehicle. Generally, we realize the value of having reserves for many life domains but are slow to practice preventative strategies for intangible components of health and wellness. The same way that a vehicle bumper is designed to protect the internal machinery and passengers, proactively fortifying a storage of optimism and emotional flexibility to cushion against inevitable challenges is a better strategy than hoping for the best when suffering is upon us.

Living purposefully is one way to enhance our wellness reserves. “Eudaimonic (Greek word for human flourishing or prosperity) well-being also appears to offer a protective buffer against increased health risk among the educationally disadvantaged” (Ryff, 2017, p. 159). Yet, a deterrent from pursuing life purposes is that it may seem static. The idea of purpose in life looms so large it is easy to assess that there are limited chances to dedicate oneself to the best purpose. This does not have to be the case – multiple purposes can be beneficial (McKight & Kashdan, 2009) and modification of one or more of our purposes in life is ordinary.

In fact, human beings are unique in that we can deliberately alter the course of our own life. A lioness cannot decide tomorrow that she will no longer hunt prey and become a vegan. A whale cannot live on land next week because it is tired of swimming. Birds do not simply stop flying. Bacteria and viruses do not just clean up their act and stop infecting other organisms. Yet, you and I can radically and often instantaneously change behavior and purposes if our current experience no longer meets our needs, abilities or interests. I can quit my job tomorrow and move to another country tomorrow if I wanted to. We can also take “baby steps” to slightly modify with tweaks that shift the trajectory of our life goals. The result is the course of our life is dynamic— we can choose a purpose then adjust as needed.

We have the agency to decide on a path and to change course contingent on what is learned along the way.

Reframing and Cushioning are constructs that can activate agency and compliment wellness. Reframing is not acting as if what is happening is not real or creating a fantasy to escape reality. Nor is it an attempt to diminish actual life challenges. The outcomes of reframing and cushioning do not minimize or ignore the macrostructures that affect us. Rather, reframing and cushioning are agentic behaviors to push back on structures in the following ways, 1) intentionally seek to interpret lived experiences through a more optimistic lens, and 2) develop reserves of positive psycho-emotional energy to pull from when needed.

Looking for the positive aspects of things takes effort, yet noticing the negative is the first step. Like the yin-yang in Chinese philosophy suggests that separate forces are often interconnected and presuppose one another. The Cushioning strategy reminds us to fill ourselves with both joy and nutrition while we protect against what could enter both our mind and body. Consuming nutritious foods fortifies us at the cellular level for longevity and strength. Similarly, taking in joyous moments fills us spiritually for optimism and balance. When festive experiences and nourishing foods are not readily available then we must intentionally seek them out. As a short list of examples to develop your Cushioning tool kit, do any or all of the following: shut off the local news, listen to uplifting music, meditate, pray, exercise, smile for no reason, smile for good reason, express gratitude verbally and in writing, say I love you and mean it, be with loved ones, be responsible for something other than yourself, go to nature, live your purposes.

CAPÍTULO 5 (SPANISH)

REENCUADRAR Y AMORTIGUAR LA ADVERSIDAD

En este capítulo me refiero a la teoría cognitiva conductual, la teoría polivagal y la atención plena para interpretar las experiencias académicas y de la vida personal de dos estudiantes colegiales. Reencuadrar y amortiguar la adversidad son dos terminos que surgieron de los diálogos cogenerativos con ambas estudiantes. He traducido este capítulo en el idioma Español estándar para expandir el grupo de lectores para las aplicaciones pragmáticas de los conceptos prominentes en este texto.

Estoy siempre interesado en escuchar y aprender de los estudiantes colegiales por los cuales yo trabajo fuertemente para educar y apoyar. Por ejemplo, este capítulo está inspirado por las experiencias de vida que obtuve de dos estudiantes de Bronx Community College que se encontraban haciendo trabajo voluntario para el programa de orientación de nuevos estudiantes. A la conclusion del programa, estas dos amigas colegiales, Iris y Betty (seudónimos), se acercaron a mi para indagar sobre la despensa de alimentos del colegio. Iris se introdujo como una residente indocumentada de los Estados Unidos, madre de dos niños con necesidades especiales, una soldada contra el abuso sexual, viviendo en un refugio para personas sin hogar y con un ingreso de menos de \$900 al mes para una familia de cuatro. Betty se introdujo como una estudiante de las artes liberales y madre de un hermoso niño.

A pesar de sus desafíos personales, me parecio que Iris estaba enfocada en el éxito académico mucho más que otros estudiantes en el colegio. Tanto para Iris como para Betty, su progreso académico, sus calificaciones y su involucrimiento en actividades co-curriculares

estaban por encima del promedio del cuerpo estudiantil. Iris servía como defensora vigorosa contra el abuso sexual y ambas amigas También organizaban servicios comunitarios.

De inmediato yo sentí compasión y un fuerte deseo de ayudar a Iris. Escolté a ambas estudiantes a la dispensa de alimentos que quedaba al otro lado del colegio. Mientras caminábamos al otro lado del colegio empecé a envolver a ambas amigas en un dialogo cógenerativo (Bayne, 2012) y generamos información que expandió nuestro arsenal de agencia colectiva y conocimiento respectivo.

Interesado en cómo cada una de ellas lograban alcanzar múltiples prioridades que compiten por su tiempo y recursos, pregunté, ¿cómo es que mantienen el enfoque, el compromiso y la productividad? Lo que yo interpreté como una carga en la vida para Iris, ella describió de manera diferente. Lo que sigue es un extracto de nuestro diálogo cogenerativo:

Turno 1- **Manny:** Gracias por compartir sus experiencias conmigo. Parecen estar enfocadas, comprometidas y productivas a pesar de los múltiples retos y desafíos. Y ustedes hoy, están haciendo trabajo voluntario en la universidad ¿Cómo es que lo hacen todo?

Turno 2 - **Iris:** Tengo las bendiciones del sufrimiento...

Turno 3 - **Iris:** ...me dan desafíos para resolver y razones por las cuales vivir.

Turno 4 - **Iris:** estoy enfocada en ayudar a mujeres y niños marginados en refugios para desamparados. También tengo otras metas en la vida para mi familia y mi salud.

Turno 5 - **Betty:** [I] bloqueo el ruido todos los días. Me amo demasiado para dejar que el drama termine conmigo. Respeto el drama, pero no dejo que me atrape y no permito que me quede rumiando. Me pongo los audífonos y me concentro adonde me dirigo, y simplemente llego adonde tengo que llegar.

REENCUADRAR LA ADVERSIDAD

Haciendo significado de las afirmaciones de Iris, resuena de que pueden haber aspectos beneficiosos o positivos del sufrimiento que experimentamos en la vida. La adversidad, como el fracaso, nos guían en la dirección correcta. Al igual que con los dilemas, aprendemos a través del proceso de eliminación que las probabilidades de respuestas correctas aumentan con según la cantidad de opciones equivocadas que escojemos. Por lo tanto, elegir incorrectamente no siempre es una táctica defectuosa cuando el resultado está en aprendiendo a eliminar las opciones erróneas.

La adversidad es un camino hacia la empatía. Nadie puede comprender el dolor asociado con la pérdida de un niño a menos que no sea otro padre que también haya tenido esa experiencia terrible. El dolor de los acontecimientos traumáticos en la vida puede causar más compasión para otros que están sufriendo. Cuando comprendemos íntimamente las experiencias del prójimo existe la oportunidad de conexión y vínculo emocional que puede desarrollarse a partir de la experiencia común.

Resolver los Problemas Peliagudos (Alexakos, et al., 2016) que nos afectan puede ser una rampa para el desarrollo de propósitos en la vida. La aspiración profesional de Iris de apoyar a mujeres y niños marginados se basa en sus experiencias vividas. Nuestros propósitos de la vida se pueden encontrar cubiertos o enmascarados por el dolor, la lucha y/o el sufrimiento. Razones para vivir se pueden encontrar enmascarados por la angustia. A menudo los propósitos nacen de nuestras interacciones con los inevitables desafíos a los que nos enfrentamos. Victor Frankl, psicólogo y p.H. c. es el autor del libro seminal titulado, *Hombre En Búsqueda De Sentido* escrito en 1945. Frankl escribió el manuscrito para su libro autobiográfico en nueve días después de sobrevivir tres años de tortura como

prisionero de campo de concentración durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Frankl explica en detalles gráficos que "... la vida tiene significado bajo cualquier condición, incluso la condición más miserable." (Hombre En Búsqueda De Sentido p. 16).

Adversidad | Solución dialéctica

La adversidad puede desencadenar el proceso de creación de soluciones que a su vez pueden ser una vía directa hacia una vida con propósito útil. Al igual que Iris hay millones de personas para quienes resolver dificultades conduce a encontrar propósitos en la vida. A lo largo de toda la historia, la dificultad inspira soluciones. Desde el comienzo de la civilización, la manipulación del fuego y la creación de la rueda fueron desarrollados como soluciones para resolver las dificultades. La industria, incluyendo el campo de la medicina, son excelentes ejemplos de la interacción entre las soluciones y la adversidades. Por ejemplo, en los 1940s los antibióticos (solución) fueron ampliamente disponibles para contrarrestar las infecciones bacterianas (adversidad) (Levy, 1998). Las cirugías invasivas (soluciones) se implementan para tratar una letalidad de dolencias (adversidades). Mundialmente y en nuestras propias vidas personales nos encontramos con una plétora de grandes y pequeños desafíos que requieren nuestra atención y acción.

En muchos casos encontramos que la adversidad y las soluciones existen como una dialéctica (Tobin & Roth, 2006). Dicho de otra manera, la adversidad y las soluciones son ideas individuales que tienen una pura co-relación entre sí. Ya sea para nuestros desafíos personales o con problemas en el mundo más allá del mío, la adversidad puede ser como señales que nos encaminan a las soluciones. Podemos optar por ser intencionales con acciones agénicas para contrarrestar nuestras respectivas dificultades y las de nuestros prójimos. De esta manera el propósito en la vida puede manifestarse por medio de intentar

arreglar o mejorar los males para uno mismo y para el prójimo resultando en una vida digna de vivir.

Tanto Iris como Betty distinguieron intuitivamente y aplicaron estrategias de éxito y persistencia tanto dentro como afuera del entorno universitario. Me explicaron en términos simples sus estrategias para alcanzar objetivos a pesar de las adversidades. Sus tácticas no son de gran destreza, sin embargo, las aplicaciones son eficaces en la investigación sobre las iniciativas complementarias del bienestar. En esta sección interpreto lo que Iris y Betty aplican intuitivamente contra la adversidad y la alinean con la investigación sobre el bienestar.

Figura 5.1. Expresión Laica asociada con la iniciativa del bienestar

Expresión Laica	Construcción de bienestar asociada
"Bloqueo el ruido todos los días. Lo respeto, pero no dejo que me atrape o me quede rumiando ". "Me pongo los audífonos y me enfoco a donde voy y simplemente llego adonde tengo que llegar".	Conciencia, Atención Plena
"Tengo las bendiciones del sufrimiento..." "Me amo demasiado para dejar que el drama termine conmigo."	Reencuadre Cognitivo, Teoría Policvagal
"Me dan desafíos para resolver y razones por las cuales vivir". Me enfoco en ayudar a mujeres y niños marginados en refugios para desamparados ".	Propósitos de la vida, Efecto Positivo

Reencuadre Cognitivo

Iris reencuadra la adversidad de una manera notable. Yo estaba intrigado de la manera en la que describió el sufrimiento como bendiciones. Mientras que Iris reconoció que ella tiene dificultades muy pesadas en la vida, ella recibe los desafíos como oportunidades para

desarrollar soluciones. En otras palabras, para Iris, la pobreza y el abuso sexual no son sólo razones para sufrir, sino que son razones para resolver el dolor y para darle razones para vivir. El reencuadre cognitivo o la reestructuración es una técnica utilizada por los terapeutas cognitivo-conductuales (TCC) para aliviar la ansiedad y otros trastornos psicosociales (Shurick, et al., 2012).

Atención Plena

En la superficie puede parecer que Betty expresó evitación de la probabilidad de tumulto en su vida cuando dijo: "Bloqueo el ruido todos los días. Lo respeto, pero no dejo que me atrape o me quede rumiando . Me pongo los audífonos y me enfoco a donde voy y simplemente llego adonde tengo que llegar." Su determinación explícita de no atascarse o rumiar ejemplifica una conciencia clara de la situación, no una fijación en los momentos que describe como posible drama. Mientras que, escuchando música puede indicar al forastero un intento de estar desconectado de la realidad, los audífonos y la música son herramientas que Betty usa para crear un ambiente mental enfocado en el cual se puede concentrar en sus sentidos, pensamientos y emociones en la dirección de su elección. El acto de bloquear el ruido cada día indica un reconocimiento diario de su ambiente y del reconocimiento de sí misma en esos espacios. Por lo tanto, Betty está demostrando intuitivamente atención plena y está practicando cuidado personal por medio de conducir su atención y enfocar su fuerza de voluntad para reencuadrar el lente por el que observa las experiencias que provocan ansiedad (Khng, 2018).

Teoría Policvagal

Durante nuestro diálogo cogenerativo, Iris dijo que ella es la receptora de "... las bendiciones del sufrimiento..." Y Betty dijo: " Me amo demasiado para dejar que el drama termine conmigo ".

Las mentes y los cuerpos humanos están envueltos con los ambientes externos e internos a un nivel primitivo, biológico y subconsciente. Como tal, la amenaza de daño, incluyendo el sufrimiento o drama descrito por las dos estudiantes, activa nuestro sistema nervioso autónomo para liberar adrenalina y obligar a nuestros cuerpos a luchar o escapar de la circunstancias (Lucas, et al., 2018). Alternativamente, el sufrimiento reencuadrado como bendiciones y el rechazo del desorden como un acto de amor propio, de la manera en las que Iris y Betty lo han hecho también tiene efectos sobre el sistema nervioso que pueden conducir a sentimientos de seguridad y calma. En mi observación, las estudiantes a través de la acción de reencuadrar la adversidad, orientaron al sistema nervioso autonómico lejos de la neurocepción (Porges & Dana, 2018) de peligro.

Imaginar la adversidad como una idea constructiva o positiva no es una tarea básica. Los cerebros humanos están cableados para buscar placer y evitar el dolor. Aún así, el dolor es una sensación necesaria para nuestra supervivencia (Zylla, et al., 2017). En su forma más básica, el dolor es un indicador de que algo está mal, y que necesitamos volver a la homeostasis. Junto con el reencuadre de la adversidad, el efecto positivo se utiliza como protectores de la cepa psico-emocional de la desgracia.

EFFECTO AMORTIGUADOR

Una manera de manejar la angustia es ser proactivo durante tiempos relativamente tranquilos. Tarde o temprano todo el mundo se enfrentará a tiempos difíciles. Por lo tanto la construcción de reservas de bienestar psico-emocional positivas antes de los desafíos puede tener un efecto amortiguador o protector (Hanssen, et al., 2017). Este concepto no es diferente del de ahorrar dinero en una cuenta de banco para el día que haya una emergencia, hacer ejercicio para aumentar los músculos para mantener la fuerza en el futuro, y tener

seguro para su salud, hogar y vehículo. En general, nos damos cuenta del valor de tener reservas para muchos dominios de la vida, pero somos lentos para practicar estrategias preventivas para los componentes intangibles de la salud y de el bienestar. De la misma manera que un parachoques de vehículo está diseñado para proteger la maquinaria interna y los pasajeros, fortalecer proactivamente un almacenamiento de optimismo y flexibilidad emocional para amortiguar los desafíos inevitables es una mejor estrategia que tener esperanzas de que todo salga bien cuando el sufrimiento está sobre nosotros.

Vivir con propósito es una manera de mejorar nuestras reservas de bienestar. "El bienestar Eudamónico también parece ofrecer amortiguación protectora contra riesgos de salud para la personas desfavorecidas educacionalmente" (Ryff, 2017, p. 159). Sin embargo, uno de los impedimentos contra perseguir propósitos en la vida es que los propósitos pueden parecer estáticos. La idea de propósito en la vida parece ser tan grande que es simple llegar a la conclusión de que sería muy difícil y que las oportunidades o son muy pocas o limitadas para dedicarse a un propósito. Esto no tiene que ser el caso – múltiples propósitos pueden ser beneficiosos (McKight & Kashdan, 2009) y la modificación de uno o más de nuestros propósitos en la vida es común.

De hecho, los seres humanos son únicos en que podemos alterar deliberadamente la trayectoria de nuestra vida. Una leona no puede decidir mañana que ya no cazará presas y que se convertirá en una vegetariana. Una ballena no puede decidir que va a vivir una semana en la tierra porque está cansada de nadar. Las aves simplemente no dejan de volar. Las bacterias y los virus no pueden decidir que van a dejar de infectar a otros organismos. Sin embargo, usted y yo podemos cambiar radicalmente y a menudo instantáneamente nuestro comportamiento y propósitos cuando estos dejan de satisfacer nuestras necesidades,

habilidades o intereses. También podemos tomar "pasos de bebé" para modificar ligeramente con ajustes que cambian la trayectoria de nuestros objetivos en la vida. El resultado es que el curso de nuestra vida es dinámico – usted puede elegir un propósito y ajustarlo según sea necesario. Usted tiene la agencia para decidir sobre un camino y para cambiar el curso contingente según lo que aprenda a lo largo del camino.

El reencuadre y la cojición son estrategias que pueden activar la agencia y complementar el bienestar. Reencuadrar no es actuar como si lo que está sucediendo no es real ni crear una fantasía para escapar de la realidad. Tampoco es un intento de disminuir los desafíos reales de la vida. Los resultados del reencuadre y la amortiguación no minimizan ni ignoran las macroestructuras que nos afectan. Más bien, el reencuadre y la amortiguación son comportamientos agénicos para empujar contra las estructuras de las siguientes maneras: 1) intencionalmente tratar de interpretar experiencias vividas a través de un lente más optimista, y 2) desarrollar reservas de energía psico-emocional positiva para utilizarlas cuando sea necesario.

Buscar los aspectos positivos requiere esfuerzo, pero enfocarse en lo negativo es fácil y a menudo es lo primero que notamos. La mayoría de las cosas, físicas o conceptuales, tienen más que un lado solitario. Como el Ying-Yang en la filosofía China sugiere que las fuerzas separadas se interconectan a menudo y se presuponen la una a la otra. La estrategia de amortiguación nos recuerda de llenarnos de alegría y nutrición mientras protegemos contra lo que pudiera entrar en nuestra mente o en nuestro cuerpo. Consumir alimentos nutritivos nos fortalece a nivel celular para longevidad y fortaleza física. Del mismo modo, la toma de momentos gozosos nos llena espiritualmente de optimismo y equilibrio. Cuando las experiencias gozosas y los alimentos nutritivos no están fácilmente disponibles, entonces

debemos buscarlos intencionalmente. Al siguiente encuentre una breve lista de ejemplos para desarrollar el arsenal de herramientas de amortiguación: apague las noticias locales, escuche música edificante, medite, ore, haga ejercicio, sonría sin razón, sonría por buena razón, exprese gratitud verbalmente o por escrito, exprese amor, sea responsable por otra cosa o persona, disfrute de la naturaleza, viva sus propósitos.

CHAPTER 6

ABSTRACT PURPOSES, CONCRETE SYMBOLS

Victor Frankl was a preeminent scholar and trailblazer of research on meaning and purpose in life. Frankl did not explicitly distinguish between purpose and meaning in his writings the way other scholars recently have. Still, he held that every individual has an essential need for purpose in life which he referred to as a *Will to Meaning*. Void of purposes in life, Frankl asserted that individuals exhibit maladaptive and risky behavior. In his seminal book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), Frankl introduced Logotherapy as a psychotherapeutic approach for distressed individuals without purposeful lives.

Frankl believed that there are three pathways for arriving at meaning and purposes in life: “1) by creating a work or doing a deed; 2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; 3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.” (Frankl, 1946/1992, p. 115) The concepts of how purpose is derived were influenced by Frankl's tragic experiences and observations as a concentration camp prisoner.

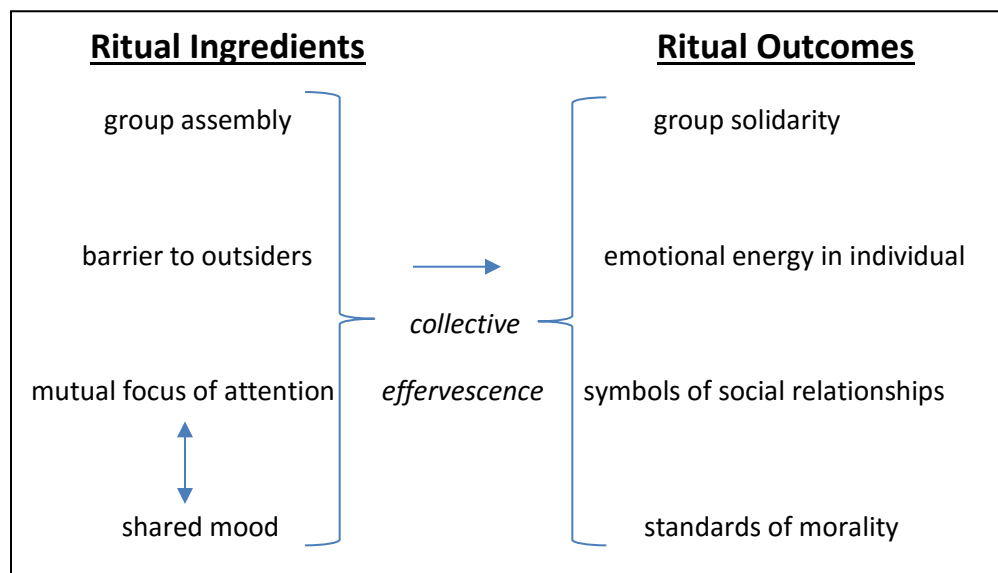
While I agree with Frankl's paths to life purposes, I propose there is an affiliated and necessary conduit for progressing along trajectories toward life purposes. I hypothesize that life purposes are sustained by a transfusion of situational energy and continuous interpretation of symbols imbued with meaning. Using the theory of interaction rituals (Collins, 2004), I make the case that life purposes are transmitted in a social process and can be (re)learned via formation of and engagement with symbols. I look to the work of Collins and Tobin to help expand my conceptualization that: 1) life purposes are socially constructed and transmitted to the individual

by symbols, and 2) life purposes are abstract constructs that need concrete symbols to sustain social commitments.

Collins' (2004) Interaction Ritual (IR) theory is a robust explanatory model of social interactions along with the causes and consequences of variations in mutual focus and emotional entrainment. Collins builds on and interprets the works of Emile Durkheim and Erving Goffman to develop and support his conceptualization of how variations in the intensity of rituals lead to distinctions in social membership and ideas that lead to them and how much of this occurs at the micro-sociological level. There are four main ingredients and four main outcomes of interaction rituals. In the IR model shown in figure 6.1, Collins depicts the processes within and between *ritual ingredients* and *ritual outcomes*.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on two variables of the IR model. Specifically, I will interpret symbols of social interactions and emotional energy in individuals on the *ritual outcomes* side of the IR model to inform my theory that symbols sustain life purposes. For an in-depth description of the IR see Collins' book titled, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

Figure 6.1. Collins Interaction Ritual Model



Purposes Need Symbols

Life purposes are abstract and complicated constructs that can be disregarded without use of symbols to concretize and sustain the concepts. Purposes are often-times intangible and nebulous aspirational ideas. Freedom, peace, and love are some of my life purposes that have various interpretations as to their definition and the effect. Additionally, purposes such as freedom, peace, and love are formless and thus indiscernible to our five senses. For example, how does peace and freedom look, smell, feel, taste, or sound? Life purposes often are in the form of an idea, which when left to itself can neither exist on its own nor be sustained indefinitely in our conscious mind. Not only are life purposes intangible complex constructs, but our prefrontal cortex has limited bandwidth to hold all ideas indefinitely in the short-term memory. As such, I use Collins' IR theory to argue that we identify or generate symbols and imbue the emblems with emotional energy to retain life purposes beyond an initial experience when it was identified.

Society becomes patterned by symbols, or more precisely by respect for symbols; but the symbols are respected only to the extent that they are charged up with sentiments by participation in rituals. Sentiments run down and fade away unless they are periodically renewed. (Collins 2004, p. 37)

The diamond engagement ring is a good example of an emblem of the life purpose "being in love." Popularized by the De Beers Company slogan, "A Diamond is Forever," the diamond stone is an emblem, in the American psyche, that marriage is a lifelong prospect. Marriage is a ritual charged up with emotional significance for people who are to have love everlasting. While love is amorphous, the cultural symbolisms of marriage, the physical emblem of a wedding ring, and children the most evident manifestation of adoration are only few examples of how we concretize life purposes with symbols.

To further elaborate the point that symbols make concrete life purposes, I provide an example of when symbols are no longer meaningful, and purposes fade away. Like a decaying monument or a public park with overgrown shrubs in disrepair, as purpose indicators lose import our dreams atrophy over time. Attending and graduating from college or university is a salient endeavor for many people. The ramifications for individuals earning a post-secondary degree can be widespread and far reaching. Formal higher education degrees open the path to increased knowledge, various professions, and socioeconomic movement. However, before long many college students once excited by the promise of realizing their life purpose are sidetracked from their desired professions. There are numerous ways that one's dreams are diverted – essentially the emblems of other priorities (e.g., health, finances, children) can distract from one's purpose (i.e., educational aspirations). Soon the symbols that support focus on academic success (i.e., class attendance, exams, study hour) become less important, then fade away.

When the practices stop, the beliefs lose their emotional import, becoming mere memories, forms without substance, eventually dead and meaningless. By the same token, new symbols can be created; whenever the group assembles and focuses its attention around an object that comes to embody their emotion, a *new sacred object* is born... (Collins 2004, p. 37)

WHOSE PURPOSES ARE THESE?

If we follow the logic that ideas are socially constructed and that purposes are aspirational ideas, then it follows that life purposes are also not our own, they too are socially constructed. Our social experiences inform our life purposes. But how then do the purposes become personalized? The circulation of symbols through the social and to the personal is how purposes are transferred from societal ideas interpreted by the individual. Collins suggests there are three layers in an IR from social action to internalization of symbols. Symbols are infused with situational emotional energy that circulates through an individual's conversations and internalized thoughts.

We have, in short, a primary realm of living rituals and the symbols that they charge with significance; and a secondary realm where those symbols become circulated in the IRs that make up the surrounding social networks, whether taken as positive or negative, or just treated reflexively as items of news, gossip, reputation. They become representations of groups who are somewhere else, at a distance. Finally, there is a further, third order in which symbols circulate, what individuals do with them when they are alone, outside the presence of others. The most intimate level of circulation is inside individuals' minds, in their inner conversations that make up thinking, in the fantasies that make up the inner self. (Collins, pp. 98-99)

Self-Study

The next section of this chapter is a self-study about my process for determining a research topic for doctoral studies. I explore my own narrative through the lens of IR theory revealing the social process and personal struggle of uncovering my doctoral research inquiry.

Whether we are cognizant of the construct or if it is a primal instinct - living organisms on Earth pursue significance in life. Even a single blade of grass extends out toward the sun for its place amongst the thousands of blades of grass within the ecosystem in which it exists. At this moment, I am conceiving the words to write this sentence because I want them to be significant to someone, somewhere at some time. We want to matter and what we do to matter. Yet, with so much distraction and competing priorities how can we determine what matters most? How do we matter in a chaotic universe that is unforgiving? One way many people, including myself, attempt to identify significance is by searching for purposes in life.

What is happening to me?

For many years, I endeavored obsessively to identify the purposes of my life. What am I supposed to do with the remainder of my life, I asked myself? Who am I supposed to become? Night and day, but mostly at night, I spent scores of hours, lucid at times and half-awake at others, desperately searching for an indicator of what makes my life worth living. I was not necessarily looking to solve the evolution versus creationism debate. Instead, I was struggling to recognize what my unique purposes for living are.

My soul, my heart, and my mind worked in concert, yet equally unsuccessful they were in finding my life purposes. The sense of emptiness I felt was inescapable during the most challenging months of June, July, August, September, and October. The feelings were unlike anything that I have ever felt before, so I struggle to describe them.

What was happening to me? There were no obvious warnings, just a sudden vacancy in my deprived soul. The sensation was akin to losing something irreplaceable, every night for five months. Where in the world did this emptiness come from? Why now? I yearned for lucidity. Each effort I made for certainty left me more confused and sadder than the prior night. Have I been living an unsubstantial life? Have I tricked myself to believe that my existence is meaningful only to now realize that it is not? What is a life worth living, I questioned daily, and tried answering every excruciating night?

Group Solidarity

At the time, I did not know that like me many people pursuing Ph.D. degrees experience existential crises and major anxieties evoked by the processes of becoming an academic researcher. Doctoral students grappling with their mental health, including suicidality, is a growing health concern (Evans, 2018). A traditional structure of doctoral studies can be a solitary and reductionistic process whereby the researcher is consumed by methodological attempts to prove the statistical significance of a claim or claims forecasted before the study commences. The rigorous process and high stakes of doctoral studies impacts physical and mental health.

Applying IR theory, the feeling of membership in the enterprise of pursuing the highest academic degree for my profession was fascinating to me. I felt solidarity with the doctoral students in the Urban Education program and connected to Ph.D. students throughout the

country. During the first year in the Ph.D. program at the CUNY Graduate Center the seven other students in my cohort seemed certain about their research inquiries. Throughout the first-year colloquium, we would all practice our spiel: my name is X, I teach at Y, and my area of research interest is Z. Everyone, including me, practiced these assertions, except that in my case I was still searching for a profound research inquiry to help improve the world beyond myself. An initial challenge was to determine definitively what would be the focus of my research.

I should have forgiven myself at the time, but I did not know then what I know now. According to Tobin (2006) there are two foundational inquiries for research in the social and behavioral sciences are: 1) What is happening (phenomenology)? and 2) Why is it happening (hermeneutics)? The inception of academic research in the field of urban education can commence with these two questions. Also, a goal of social and behavioral research is to utilize theory to inform practice, not to be reductionistic in searching for one way to do things better than the other (Tobin, 2013). Said another way, social life is complicated, each person's lived experiences are unique from the other, thus, simplified analyses of all things devalue the uniqueness and nuance of everything. These important research frameworks were not evident to me early in my doctoral tenure.

During the time that I was struggling with identifying a research inquiry, I was an employee of a large urban public university system with seven community colleges in New York City. I understood that many of the students at community colleges were undergoing a similar dilemma as mine. Many of the community college students I encountered struggled with choosing an academic major to pursue and a career trajectory. One student intrigued me. A senior at the community college where I worked, she chose to intentionally fail her remaining course to be held back for one more term. She explained her decision to me as needing more

time, "...to figure out what to do with my life...". I was fascinated by her situation, she clearly articulated her thinking to me: "I want to do something important with my life, I want to be somebody, leave a legacy, I just don't know what yet." She believed that remaining for one more semester would give her the time to determine what to do with the rest of her life.

Mutual Focus of Attention and Shared Mood

The synergy between my academic crises and the challenges I observed in the urban community college students at the University system where I worked illuminated salient themes for me.

Many community college students I encountered were sorting through their identities, looking for meaningful experiences, and searching for purposes in life. Hundreds of community college students, over the last ten years of my higher education career have expressed to me some version of the following questions: "What am I going to do with my life?" "Who am I, really?" "How do you choose the right career?" "What is my purpose?"

I was humbled, blessed, and cursed by the reality that I was undergoing a crisis much like those emerging adult urban public college students. While they were undergoing a quarter-life crisis (Arnet, 2007), I was experiencing a breakdown of my own. At the time I wanted nothing more than to escape my confusion that manifested as a physical sensation of loss. Yet, in hindsight, the experience helped me better empathize with the students. Certainly, I needed to resolve my own crisis and I felt paternal responsibility for helping students gain clarity about their life journeys. I felt tormented for not having solutions for either myself or the students. Still, I was energized by the challenge of figuring out what my purposes in life are and how to help students forge their own life paths.

WHICH WAY OUT?

I figured that mining my life for a passion would springboard me to the needed research inquiry. For many weeks I invested time to anxiously reading Oprah blogs and watching YouTube videos about "identifying your passion" and "living a life of passion." I found temporary respite in watching the OWN network. Particularly, *Super Soul Sundays* provided some relief from my existential bewilderment. Engaging with the numerous find your passion self-help tips, blogs, and exercises helped me to feel productive. More importantly, the blogs I read were evidence that my search for passion was also shared by many others.

I stayed on task for months until I realized that pursuing a passion was not helpful for me. A single passion was neither the meaning nor the motivation for research that I was searching for. Passion is constraining and limiting. A passion is reductionistic and singular. Like a fetish, passion is driven by hyper-focus. Initially, I thought I could find a research inquiry in searching for my passion, however, intense desire or enthusiasm for one thing led me astray. I have many passions about a variety of things distinct enough from one another to effectively narrow them all down to one focus. Designing a focused research study from my range of passions felt like an impossibility.

Fortunately, I enrolled in a course titled: *Teaching and Learning and Learning to Teach* where I met Presidential Professor Kenneth Tobin who imparted value for all research methodology while also challenging the hegemonic crypto-positivistic worldviews that dominate academic research. As an example, traditional positivistic research methodologies direct the researcher to forecast results at commencement of a study. However, projecting research results before completion of a study is counterintuitive. Designing a study that is embedded with the anticipated results inevitably prejudices the researcher. Moreover, predicting the outcome of a

study at inception results in either one of two outcomes - the affirmation or refutation of the claim. Conversely, approaching social and behavioral research as a learner while looking for patterns and contradictions to emerge and explore without predetermined hypotheses is rich and expansive. The process of understanding what is happening and analyzing why it is happening enables us to access many data resources (Tobin, 2012). Researchers who ask what is happening (phenomenology)? and why is it happening (hermeneutics)? can explore the broader complexities of sociocultural experiences to improve practice.

While enrolled in the *Teaching and Learning and Learning to Teach* course, I participated in a research squad of doctoral colleagues in the urban education, learning sciences tract. The squad served as a team of trusted researchers and peer reviewers in a safe space to construct and challenge theories. As an early member of squad, I was intrigued when Tobin extended the realm of education beyond the field of classrooms to include teaching and learning in spaces like playgrounds, places of worship, museums, and in homes. In fact, teaching and learning takes place everywhere and anywhere. For example, reading a book at night on my bed and learning a routine at a dance studio are legitimate learning experiences. Hence, epistemologically all action is learning. And the field where the learning takes place often does not occur in a formal classroom.

Emotional Energy and Symbols of Social Relationships

Becoming aware of the frameworks and methodologies described in this chapter and others throughout this manuscript have been transformational for me. Soon the *Educational and Life Purposes* unfolded as my research focus. Pursuing a research inquiry that could potentially help community college students made me feel elated. My heart, mind, and soul were at peace with conducting research for supporting community college student success.

Standards of Morality

Today, I choose to sit in silence, writing about myself for my self and others, reflecting on who I am and how I have come to determine a specific area of research inquiry in the field of urban education. Somedays I am surer than others about what is my research focus as inquiry into phenomena is both emergent and contingent. Still, I am lucid about my motivation: during my 10-year career in New York urban public community colleges, I am witness to hundreds of students who have expressed the desire to live purposefully. Therefore, I will design an awareness enhancing intervention, known as a heuristic, to support community college students looking for experiences to clarify their authentic aspirations.

In developing the Purposes in Life Heuristic, I listen radically to community college students. Many students that I have encountered are optimistic about the world most days. Often, however, as students feel more comfortable to share their thoughts and experiences with me their insecurities and conflicts about life are revealed. Living well is often challenging and life unordered, I hear from students. Too often college students conflate career choice with purpose in life. Many students share with me their fears about getting a job after graduation, keeping a job, retirement, love, loneliness, acceptance, identity, whether to have children or not, taking care of their parents, moving out and away from their parents, etc. Young adults tell me they feel vulnerable in a world that seems increasingly dangerous and uncertain. Many students do not know all their options, or which is the best decision to make so they may delay choices or lack confidence in their decisions and may feel regret for outcomes reached.

They have asked me, "how do I figure out what to do with my life? I want to do something important; I just don't know what to do." Male, female, lesbian, gay, transgender,

straight, adolescent, adult, etc. have sought my assistance with providing them with guidance with a version of the following critical life question: to what should I dedicate my life?

I have grown fascinated by how purpose and meaning in life manifests in us. I became highly motivated to answer some of these inquiries for my students and for myself. Over a few months of researching the constructs meaning in life and purpose in life I identified a body of scholarly research in the positive psychology and philosophy literature, and to a lesser degree in the career development and student development literature. The first book I read on meaning and purpose in life was *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl. Following this book, I have read dozens of purposes in life articles by many scholars, including but not limited to, William Damon, Carol Ryff, Michael Steger, Kendall Cotton Bronk, and Patrick McKnight and Todd Kashdan. What has become a strong interest of mine, is to develop an intervention, an exercise or series of exercises, a roadmap of sorts by which community college students who are interested can avail themselves of a process to identify their purposes in life. In so doing I am making meaning of my lived experiences and moving towards one of my purposes in life.

While I applied to the Urban Education Ph.D. program uncertain about my research inquiry, it is not a surprise to me that I have come to identify Life Purposes as an overarching dissertation research topic. In hindsight, for as long as I can remember, I have often felt intense emotions to fulfill my life purposes but was not always clear about what those purposes are. I believe that an antecedent to my search for purpose was my father's nudging when I was an adolescent, he often communicated to me "...if you don't know what to do with your life by now, you'll never know." Much of my life has been driven by figuring out how to live purposefully. So, in many ways my research focus on Purpose in Life is also a self-discovery process of trying to live my own Purposes. A noble major Purpose of mine is to help others

become aware of and move toward fulfilling their own Purposes in life. I sought passion when I commenced the urban education doctoral program at CUNY's Graduate Center, instead I found Purposes in Life.

FOLLOWING THE HERD

Can we have complete authentic life purposes when our behaviors and thoughts are explicitly and subversively influenced by external influences? As social beings, our language, thoughts, and experiences are constructed with others, so our purposes are never only ours.

Inextricable from how we are in life are the influences of the external world imposing itself upon us. According to Roth (2007) we merely are hosts or hostages to intentions (goals) that are ascribed to us. Said another way, we are vessels that take on and express the characteristics of others sometimes intentionally and at times without awareness.

As infants and children most of our knowledges are determined for us. As one basic example, our guardians and teachers may choose to read books to us. Selection of a book is influenced by many factors including (at least) parents' interests, education and resources to acquire the book. In addition, books are comprised of words, topics, and messages provided from an author's perspective, influenced by an editor's lens, and imbued with meaning contained in the words and images written and depicted in the book. The compilation of the various circumstances that influence the selection of a book and the activities needed to create a book's content are all forces obscure to the child in that they inform our discernments about the world. As children, we speak many of the words we hear our parents read from books, yet we did not create those words we say – hence the language we use has been given to us without our critical awareness.

Similarly, parents, caregivers, or teachers may have reprimanded us for certain behaviors and rewarded us for others. External rewards and punishments effect how we differentiate what is right from wrong and inform what behavior to pursue or to avoid. As such, the standards that guide our conduct have been established for us not by us. We choose whether to behave morally, but the foundation of what is ethical has been embedded in us before we could think critically about what is right and what is wrong. That is not to say that we are stuck with the standards we have learned. According to Collins (2004), “Contrary to an implication of Freudian theory and others that stress childhood experience, socialization once laid down does not endure forever; emotional energies and symbolic meanings fade if they are not renewed” (p. 44).

An example of how life purposes are socially constructed is the obvious human behavior of many following the crowd intentionally at times and often without knowing. Imitation or duplication are effective ways of learning. Through the lens of sociocultural theory, rooted in the work of Lev Vygotsky, learning is a social process not merely dependent on an individual’s cognitive ability, but deeply influenced, and co-constructed by the individual along with others. Thus, learning is situated in social practices. Through the comprehension of cultural practices (e.g., religion, marriage) and productive use of cultural tools (e.g., language, symbols), we follow the herd in order to learn and for survival.

Still, many people trail the herd like sheep throughout a lifetime without asking questions about where are you going and why? A primary goal of mine in writing this manuscript is to empower individuals with theories, pragmatic information, and interventions to interrupt mindless insignificance. While we inevitably shadow the herd, occasionally taking the time to stop and ponder the reasons for why we do things and where we are going can help disrupt mechanical automatic thinking and behavior.

Many of our thoughts are hijacked by unfocused activity resulting in robotic multitask-centered behavior. We experience task unrelated thoughts or mind wandering 30-50% of the time (Levinson, et al. 2014). Conversely, research in neural processing suggests that participation in focused activity is beneficial to the structure and functioning of the brain (Davidson, 2010). Through learning and living with intention, our lives can become more significant to us and others. Noticing our experiences and becoming aware of our life purposes are valuable learning opportunities that can also be grounding. Like attention to the outbreath that brings us back to focus during meditation, recognition of life purposes, particularly when we are distracted, can be centering.

As adults living in the 21st century, we are constantly in recipient of direct and subliminal messages by media on every technological device in our possession and around us. Powerful pictures shown on high definition screens with vivid images and surround sound that brings fantasy to our senses as near realistic experiences. The seemingly unavoidable barrage of communications external to us creep into our everyday realities so that they become entangled with who we are and how we aspire to be. Large multinational billion-dollar companies perversely instruct us on what a good life means (i.e., cars, vacations, toys). Messages are powerfully structured with potential to shape our behavior and duplicitously direct our life intentions. As social beings we learn from one another and the environment, so the purpose creep is inevitable.

Purposes in life as a construct and questions like how I want to live or who I want to be can seem antithetical to a mindful way of being present in the world. How can we be grounded in the moment if we are concerned with becoming our future selves? My reaction to this question is that today is the most important time for our future self. I agree with Jon Kabat Zinn (2001) that

we are on a path that is influenced by what happens now. At this moment, what I do, think, or say is both influenced by my sociohistorical interactions and simultaneously informs how I will feel and who I will be minutes, days, weeks, months and years from now. We are always in a continual process of becoming. Thus, every moment matters.

Time is arguably the most precious resource we have. We cannot directly purchase more time from a merchant. Yes, we can take care of our health and wellness to live a longer time. Still, we cannot know for sure how much time we have left beyond now - the present is the only time that is marked. That is not to say that the past and the future are trivial. In fact, they are most relevant to the extant time – everything we do (and have done) converts to who we will be. That is culture is continuously being shaped and reconstructed. I am reminded of this with every sentence I write then reformulate for my dissertation - I (re)learn something or comprehend constructs from another lens.

APPENDICES

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire

MLQ Please take a moment to think about what makes your life feel important to you. Please respond to the following statements as truthfully and accurately as you can, and please remember that these are very subjective questions and that there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer according to the scale below:

Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Somewhat Untrue	Can't Say True or False	Somewhat True	Mostly True	Absolutely True
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. I understand my life's meaning.
2. I am looking forward to something that makes my life feel meaningful.
3. I am always looking to find my life's purpose.
4. My life has a clear sense of purpose.
5. I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.
6. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.
7. I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.
8. I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.
9. My life has no clear purpose.
10. I am searching for meaning in my life.

MLQ syntax to create Presence and Search subscales:

Presence: 1, 4, 5, 6, & 9 (reverse-coded)

Search: 2, 3, 7, 8 & 10

The copyright for this scale is owned by the University of Minnesota. The questionnaire is intended for free use in research and clinical applications. Please contact Michael S. Steger prior to any such noncommercial use. This questionnaire may not be used for commercial purposes.

The Purpose in Life Heuristic

For each statement circle the numeral that best reflects your current state of mindfulness with purpose in life. As necessary provide contextual information that applies to your ratings.

1. I feel my life has a clear sense of purpose.

5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue

Comments:

2. I am looking for something that makes my life meaningful

5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue

Comments:

3. I have a clear sense of what makes my life meaningful

5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue

Comments:

4. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose

5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue

Comments:

5. I have discovered the right career for me

5=very true, 4=true, 3= can't say true or false, 2=mostly untrue, 1= absolutely untrue

Comments:

Dignity Psychotherapy Interview Questions

- Tell me a little about your life history; particularly the parts that you either remember most, or think are the most important? When did you feel most alive?
- Are there specific things that you would want your family to know about you, and are there particular things you would want them to remember?
- What are the most important roles you have played in life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Why were they so important to you and what do you think you accomplished in those roles?
- What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of?
- Are there particular things that you feel still need to be said to your loved ones, or things that you would want to take the time to say once again?
- What are your hopes and dreams for your loved ones?
- What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, other (s)]?
- Are there words or perhaps even instructions you would like to offer your family, to help prepare them for the future?
- In creating this permanent record, are there other things that you would like included?

Life Purposes Heuristic (LPsH)

- Reflect on your life history, particularly the parts that you either remember most, or think are the most important? When did you feel most alive?
- Are there specific things that you would want your loved ones to know about you, and are there particular things you would want them to remember about you?
- What are the most important roles you have played in your life (family roles, vocational roles, community service roles, etc.)? Why are they so important to you, and what do you think you accomplished within those roles?
- What important roles do you look forward to in your life? Why are they so important to you?
- What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of?
- What are your hopes and dreams for the world beyond yourself?
- What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, siblings, other(s)]?
- What are your top two core values or principles that drive your behavior (e.g., peace, wealth, happiness, success, friendship, fame, authenticity, power, influence, justice, integrity, joy, love recognition, family, truth, wisdom, status, etc.)?
- Complete the following statement for each life domain:
 - Currently my intellectual purpose/s are...
 - Currently my physical purpose/s are ...
 - Currently my environmental purpose/s are ...
 - Currently my emotional purpose/s are ...
 - Currently my spiritual purpose/s are ...
 - Currently my social purpose/s are ...
 - Currently my financial purpose/s are ...

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