



Find Your Purpose

Using Science

Free Version

Dr. Gleb Tsipursky

My Offer to You

Thank you for reading my book! I am convinced that the science-based strategies described here will help the vast majority of readers like you strengthen their personal sense of meaning and purpose in life. In fact, I will put my money where my mouth is, and make you a money-back offer. If you can prove to me that you bought and read this book, and did all the exercises, but you still feel that you did not enrich your personal sense of meaning and purpose, I will happily give you any profit I made on the sale of the book to you. Just send your receipt and your written answers to all the exercises in the book to info@intentionalinsights.org. I hope that demonstrates my confidence that this book will help you find your purpose using science!

Endorsements

Dr. Tsipursky has done a terrific job approaching this important topic from a scientific perspective. He not only demonstrates that we don't need to imagine the supernatural to find a purpose in life, but he shows how modern research in fields such as cognitive psychology and neuroscience provide demonstrable strategies that allow us to create a purpose—our own purpose.

- **Dr. Bo Bennett** holds a Doctorate in Psychology, hosts “The Dr. Bo Show,” and wrote *Logically Fallacious* and *Year to Success*

A unique and intriguing project, well-researched, and well worth your testing out in practice. No one has done anything like this before. And it's a field much in need of work like this.

- **Dr. Richard Carrier** holds a Doctorate in History and wrote *Sense and Goodness without God* and *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt*

Dr. Tsipursky has done a great job bringing the power of meaning and purpose to the rational and scientific among us. This topic is so frequently treated as a purely religious or spiritual inquiry that it can be a very difficult process for the skeptically-minded. The need for meaning is a fundamentally human one, and no belief system can claim ownership of it. As a math major from MIT and a former software developer, it would have been a blessing to me to have this book when I began my search for purpose! Well done, Dr. Tsipursky.

- **Tim Kelley** is Founder of the True Purpose® Institute and wrote *True Purpose: Twelve Strategies for Discovering the Difference You Are Meant to Make*

*Perhaps you have wondered to yourself, “What is my meaning and purpose in life?” If so, you have plenty of company in the wondering department but may struggle to come up with answers to that question. Well, if you are ready to explore, then Gleb Tsipursky's workbook, *Find Your Purpose Using Science*, may be just what you are looking for to get the exploration going. Tsipursky, a college professor and scholar of scientific and research-based approaches to answering big questions has put together a step by step guide to help you reflect on what you really and truly care about, match that with what you are actually doing with your life, and set up a plan to move toward more meaningful and purposeful living. Along the way, Tsipursky highlights the personal stories of people who, as he does himself, discover unexpected and positive energy for living life in a meaningful and fulfilling way.*

- **Bart Worden** is the Executive Director of the American Ethical Union

Find Your Purpose Using Science clearly is one of the centerpieces of humanist education, and it should be. In my position as an American Humanist Association Education Consultant and former Director of the Kochhar Humanist Education Center, I am in the most fortunate position of recommending it to the AHA's chapters and affiliates. It should serve as one of the centerpieces of our educational program since it provides clear and practical research-based strategies for figuring out a personal sense of life's meaning and purpose.

- **Dr. Bob Bhaerman** holds a Doctorate of Education with a specialty in curricular development and is an American Humanist Association Educational Consultant and former Director of the Kochhar Humanist Education Center

Professor Tsipursky shows us that, while there is no obvious purpose to life, meaning is ours for the making. Science shows us how meaning-making is important for our happiness, and especially how community helps us discover what truly fulfills us, then helps us act on it.

- **Maria Greene** is the Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association

Dr. Gleb Tsipursky departs from the affirmation of the late Dr. Stephen Jay Gould, which suggests that the scientific method and religious approaches are differing magisteria, that is, they are asking distinct sets of questions, which, even when they overlap a bit, remain focused on different values. In Tsipursky's view, justice issues, meaning, value and even purpose issues, which are central to many religious people, can be generated very clearly from evidence based studies that use the scientific method. For conservative evangelicals like Rick Warren, there can be no purpose without a biblical warrant. Dr. Tsipursky, without rancor, demonstrates successfully to my mind that this is simply not true, and that one can live not only an ethical and moral life without religion, but a responsible, compassionate and justice-seeking life. I found it insightful throughout.

- **Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini** holds a Doctorate of Divinity Degree, is a senior minister at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus, and wrote *Nothing Gold Can Stay: The Colors of Grief*

Find Your Purpose Using Science is an effective reason-based path to deepen meaning and connect with your life's purpose. Using techniques supported by his own research and that of dozens of other scholars, Dr. Tsipursky guides readers through proven purpose discovery exercises. With his warm, engaging, and vulnerable style he shares his own personal struggle, and that of many others, to reconcile the world of science and reason with the more elusive and subtle pings of the human heart – to create a life that is larger than oneself. He guides readers through a number of activities to create their own narrative from within, to reveal their life's purpose, align their entire life with it, guide them in times of uncertainty,

chaos and despair, and empower them to achieve the impossible. Dr. Tsipurky's voice is unique, speaking to the hope, idealism, angst and empowerment of the current global population, the largest population in human history, who are uniquely suited to remake our world with their life's purpose, and use science to approach life's big question, "Why am I here?"

- **Brandon Peele**, Global Purpose Advocate, PlanetPurpose.org, Founder & Purpose Coach, The EVR1 Institute

Dr. Gleb Tsipursky's book Find Your Purpose Using Science provides a great overview of the subject. It is a must read for those who are charting their trajectory in life and are seeking to create their own meaning and purpose.

- **Mark W. Gura** is a TV/radio Host, the Executive Director of the Association of Mindfulness Meditation and Secular Buddhism, and wrote *Exploring Your Life: Mindfulness Meditation and Secular Spirituality* and *Atheist Meditation Atheist Spirituality*.

Filled with thought provoking exercises as well information on what research has shown works to provide meaning and purpose to people's lives. While Dr. Tsipursky doesn't answer the question of what your purpose in life is, he does guide you so that you can discover for yourself what your highest order goals really are. Knowing what you really want to accomplish in life provides a foundation for you to live your life, fully and with purpose.

- **Jennifer Hancock** is the Director of Humanist Learning Systems and wrote *The Humanist Approach to Happiness: Practical Wisdom* and *The Humanist Approach to Grief and Grieving*

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my partner in life, Agnes Vishnevkin, the source of so much meaning and purpose for me in my life, as well as the editor of this book. Thank you so much for being you!

The majority of the profits from this book are pledged to Intentional Insights and other philanthropic work committed to helping people find meaning and purpose in life, and refine and reach their goals through improving their thinking, feeling, and behavior patterns.

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Find Your Purpose Using Science

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For more information on this book, including for bulk discounts, email info@intentionalinsights.org or write to 6161 Braet rd., Westerville, OH, 43081.

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Introduction

What is the meaning and purpose of life for you? Please take a moment to reflect on this question. Whether you have asked yourself this question before or not, it is very helpful to check in from time to time, and ask yourself, with an open heart and open mind, once again. After all, your answer may shift over time, including by reading this book, which lays out a science-based path to help you find a deep sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Using science to address life's meaning and purpose may seem surprising to many. After all, the traditional mainstream approach believes that science can't answer big life questions – that's the job of religion.



Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan

Well, actually there's been a wave of recent research in psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and other disciplines on how we can find a rich sense of meaning and purpose in life. The workbook combines an engaging narrative, academic research, and stories from people's everyday lives, and provides a set of exercises to help you figure out your personal sense of meaning and purpose. In writing this, I drew on my own scholarship on meaning and purpose, and my experience in giving workshops, teaching classes, creating videos, and writing blog posts that translate such research into practical strategies for finding life meaning and purpose.

Now, many people who come to my workshops and classes are looking for a simple, clear,

and straightforward answer to what life is all about. They want certainty about life's meaning and purpose. Well, I'd love to address life's meaning and purpose for all people and for all time, but I can't give the absolute right answer to the big question of "what is the meaning of life." I don't deal in sound bites and dogmas.

What I can do in this book is provide you some clear and practical research-based strategies for figuring out a personal sense of life's meaning and purpose. In other words, I offer the answer to the question "what is the meaning of life for you?"

Those who attended [my workshops and classes on this topic](#) found these techniques very helpful.

One participant stated in an anonymous feedback form that s/he gained "a better understanding of what it means to search for meaning, with the research basis especially greatly contributing to my comprehension." A second noted that after attending the workshop, "I have a much better sense of how to consider questions of meaning and purpose." A third wrote that "from attending this workshop, I have gained the basic knowledge for greater self-exploration." Several chose to give videotaped interviews about their experience in a workshop on meaning and purpose. They kindly permitted me to include their names and links to their videotaped feedback, for example [Ryan Mulholand](#); [Brenda Penn](#); [Karen Thimmes](#), and [Jake Calaway](#). Their descriptions of their experience testifies to how much they benefitted from engaging with the research-based strategies to finding a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life.

I got in touch with some of these workshop participants a few weeks after the workshop, to see whether it influenced them in the long term. It did. The most illustrative statement came from Ryan, whose story I will share throughout this book. Ryan, who is a 21-year-old college student, stated that when he first came to the workshop, "my original highest order goals revolved largely around living a comfortable life." Yet in the course of the workshop, he realized that "the issue with this mindset was that it was too shallow and self-centered for me to be content with for long." As a result of the workshop, he stated that "I reached several conclusions in what I desired most out of life. I figured out that I wanted to build a life that was centered around bettering myself and other people. I wanted to be someone who constantly was learning and growing, while at the same time, being a teacher of sorts to help those around me... With these thoughts in mind, I promptly changed my major and have since then, begun to work toward making these wants into realities." His full statement describing his experience is available [here](#).

You can gain similar benefits by engaging with the content and exercises in this workbook, which offers:

- Stories from people's everyday experience finding life's meaning and purpose
- Some diverse approaches to this question informed by recent research and contemporary thinkers

- Pragmatic and straightforward strategies for working out the meaning and purpose of life for yourself

Let me give a real-life example of how the workbook helps people, by once again turning to Ryan. He read through a draft of the workbook, and described his thoughts as follows. “The majority of the book’s content focuses on exercises to help you establish the initial ideas of what hold the greatest amount of meaning and purpose... The total sum of initial work is no more than two hours, but what is that compared to the time that will be spent living life as you see fit? It is in this investment of time, both initially and continually, that you will come closer and closer to your objective. The reason for the need to revisit your plans and goals is because your answers may change. In short, life happens, and with it comes new experiences. If you do take the time to evaluate your purpose and meaning in life, then, with time, you will achieve the goals you set forth.” For his full evaluation of his experience with the book, click on [this link](#).

John, currently 27 and studying to become a teacher, also read a draft version of the workbook. Unlike Ryan, he did not go to any previous workshops or engaged with any other Intentional Insights content beforehand. This is what he wrote about his experience: “I was able to gain a new perspective on my own life and priorities. Its research-based strategies for evaluating one’s purpose and meaning have helped me develop a clearer vision for my future. I am currently pursuing a new set of goals—both personally and professionally—that align with my values. In short, I have clearer understanding of who I am and of my place in the community.” I hope the workbook will help you like it helped Ryan and John.

The first section of this workbook describes the relevance of meaning and purpose to people’s lives; the second section deals with studies and thinking on finding life’s meaning and purpose; and the third section relates the strategies and tools for figuring out your own sense of life’s meaning and purpose. Some of you may wish to skip straight to the third section, and you are welcome to do so, after taking the questionnaire described below.

This workbook comes out of my engagement with a nonprofit organization, [Intentional Insights](#). The nonprofit’s [mission](#) is to empower people to refine and reach their goals by providing research-based content to help improve thinking, feeling, and behavior patterns. One of the areas we focus on is helping people reach their life goals, such as finding meaning and purpose in life. Intentional Insights delivers such content through in-person presentations, through online channels such as [free online classes](#), [videos](#), and [blogs](#) devoted to this topic, and workbooks such as this one. Our work has been covered in mainstream media such as [The Columbus Dispatch](#), [The Examiner](#), and [elsewhere](#).

As part of that organization, I led the creation of a comprehensive program offering participants practical and pragmatic strategies for figuring out their personal answers to life's big questions. This program draws from my research on how people found purpose and meaning in diverse historical contexts (Tsipursky, [“Having](#)

[Fun](#),” [“Citizenship”](#); [“Conformism”](#); [“Living ‘America’”](#)), and research by many others as well, from a variety of disciplines. As a historian of science, I research the intersection of history, psychology, and cognitive neuroscience, specifically focusing on meaning and purpose, emotions, decision making, and agency in historical contexts. Thus, I am in the fortunate position of having scholarly expertise in combining research from many different fields into a cohesive whole, and translation of this information for a broad audience. I am especially grateful to have collaboration and feedback from experts in a variety of disciplines, which includes psychology, social work, and therapy, ([Dr. Joe Guada](#) and [Dr. Bo Bennett](#)), education ([Dr. Bob Bhaerman](#)), cognitive neuroscience ([Dr. Carlos Cabrera](#)), philosophy ([Dr. Richard Carrier](#) and [Dr. Amy White](#)), religion ([Unitarian Universalist Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini](#) and [United Methodist Rev. Caleb Pitkin](#)) and many others. All the good things in this book are the combined result of all of these efforts, while I take full and sole responsibility for any mistakes and oversights.

Before proceeding, let’s clarify some terms. Scholars on meaning and purpose define these words differently than they are used in common language. Researchers use “purpose” to refer to a broad aspiration in life that motivates one’s everyday activities. They use “meaning” as a more overarching term to refer both to one’s life purpose, but also one’s broad comprehension of one’s life, self, and the world. However, since life meaning and purpose are used interchangeably in everyday speech, I will use them interchangeably in this workbook (Steger et al. [“Acceptance”](#)).

Now, you may say that well, research and strategies based on it are all well and good, and they may work for the majority. And it’s helpful to learn about people’s personal stories, such as the one Ryan chose to share. Yet how do I know the strategies in this workbook will help me to get a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in my life?

Excellent question! I know the feeling. I often read studies and advice based on them, and am not sure whether the conclusions of studies would be relevant to my life. And while personal stories are gripping and powerful, they don’t necessarily apply to me. Moreover, as this book will describe, there are many ways one can try to gain a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. How would you know what are the best ones to pursue for you?

This is why it’s so important to evaluate and quantify your personal sense of meaning and purpose, and to tie the quantification to the different types of meaning-making activities that you may choose to do. To help you accomplish that quantification, I developed a tool, the “Meaning and Purpose Questionnaire (MPQ),” based on research on meaning and purpose, my own and that of others as well (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, Kaler, [“The Meaning in Life Questionnaire”](#); [McDonald, Wong, Gingras](#)). The MPQ will provide a baseline for you to evaluate your own progress in finding meaning and purpose. You can get a copy of the MPQ if you email us at info@intentionalinsights.org, and it is also available [here](#). We are also working on a web and mobile app where you can take the MPQ at regular intervals and graph your

sense of meaning and purpose over time. Doing so will help you understand:

- whether you are making progress in gaining a deeper sense of meaning and purpose
- what specific activities are most impactful for you in having meaning and purpose in life
- finally, how to customize the science-based strategies to gain the most benefit for yourself.

Sign up to the Intentional Insights [newsletter](#) to learn more about the app and our other offerings that help people refine and reach their goals. Also check out the Intentional Insights [Facebook Page](#), [Twitter](#), and [Pinterest](#) to engage with our content, ask us any clarifying questions, and improve your ability to gain a richer sense of life purpose.

Meaning and Purpose Questionnaire (MPQ)

Directions: Please think for 5 minutes about your sense of meaning and purpose in life. Then rank the following statements on a scale of 1 to 10, from 1 being “ABSOLUTELY NOT TRUE” to 10 being “ABSOLUTELY TRUE.” Below each, write an explanation of why you answered the way you did.

1. I have a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life
2. I have a clear understanding of what gives my life meaning and purpose
3. I actively search for a sense of meaning and purpose in life
4. I actively reflect on my sense of meaning and purpose in life
5. I engage in activities that help me experience meaning and purpose in life
6. I engage in social service that helps others have better lives
7. I have meaningful social and community bonds
8. I have social connections that help me experience meaning and purpose in life
9. I help others find meaning and purpose in life
10. I am satisfied with my sense of meaning and purpose in life

Meaning and Purpose: Relevance to Daily Life

After you've taken the MPQ, read onward!

Imagine the following scenario: you have been raised in a deeply evangelical household. From an early age, your parents taught you to pray daily and told you that the purpose and meaning of life were found in God. Attending Sunday school reinforced this message. So did the television shows that your family watched, the books that they gave you to read, and the music to which they encouraged you to listen. You grew up in this environment throughout your early teenage years, attending religious elementary and junior high schools. Then, you went off to a public high school, because your parents could not afford a religious high school. There, you met an environment that challenged your beliefs that the purpose and meaning in life were to be found only in God. You started to question and doubt, maybe even attended meetings of the local [Secular Student Alliance](#) affiliate to find out what it was all about. You wanted to explore more broadly, but were afraid of losing your sense of purpose and meaning in life.



Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan

This is the story of many young people I have come to know. They were deeply confused about meaning and purpose in life, questioning what it was all about. This questioning correlates with the [growing number of “nones.”](#) people without any religious affiliation in American society, especially among younger adults. Many nones, and [especially college aged](#)

[youth](#), are seeking for answers that don't necessarily include a God as part of the equation ([Astin, Astin, Lindholm](#)).

This workbook makes a further contribution to this public conversation. It is based on my experience with many people that I have engaged with in my role as a [professor](#) and also as President and Chief Insights Officer of [Intentional Insights](#), a nonprofit I co-founded.

So why do people come to my classes and workshops? Why do they trust me to have any more expertise in finding meaning and purpose in life than the next guy? Perhaps my own story can help answer this question.

I struggled with the question of life's meaning and purpose throughout my youth. My parents tried to sell me on their view of the meaning and purpose of life. They pushed me to become a doctor or lawyer, make a lot of money, go to synagogue, and not worry about reflecting on life's big questions.

But I was a bit of a rebel. I didn't really listen to them. Instead of going to synagogue, I spent long and lazy afternoons and evenings with my friends – hanging out, walking, playing cards, drinking, and arguing, often about the meaning and purpose of life. I particularly remember one conversation when I was 18. My two closest friends and I stayed up until 5 a.m., playing cards, drinking, and trying to convince each other that our individual vision of the meaning and purpose of life was the best one. At the same time as I argued with my buddies and expressed a false bravado, I always felt a certain emptiness in the depth of my stomach, a feeling that I lacked meaning and purpose in life.

Going to college prompted further thought. Listening to professors and reading great books caused me to rethink the meaning and purpose of life many times. I really gained a richer perspective, but never a clear answer to my question – “What is the meaning and purpose of life for me?”

So far, my story resembles that of many students, unsatisfied with the traditional answers given by parents and religious venues, who came to my classes and workshops wanting to find meaning and purpose in life. However, my life took a different route in my last year of college. I broke with my parents' wishes for me to go to medical school, prompting a pretty serious family conflict, and instead went into history. I decided to study how people in the Soviet Union, where my family came from, found purpose, happiness, and fun in life.

Since that time, I have conducted extensive research on how individuals in modern societies found meaning and purpose in life (Tsipursky, [“Conformism:” “Living ‘America’”](#)). I also applied these techniques to myself, and filled that deep pit in my stomach, developing a rich and strong sense of personal life meaning and purpose. Later in this book, I will share these strategies, and my own answers to the question of “what is the meaning of life for you?”

This background gave me an evidence-based perspective on diverse techniques and strategies for finding life's meaning and purpose in the contemporary world, as well as in my own life. After becoming a [professor at The Ohio State University](#), I have taught many college

students, and I have oriented my classes to helping them figure out their personal answer to this big life question.

Seeing how much my students benefited, I decided to use my knowledge and background to help the broader community in Central Ohio. I began to give workshops to community groups on finding life's meaning and purpose. Finding that people gained a lot from these workshops, I collaborated with a group of other enthusiasts to create a meet-up group, Columbus Rationality, which gave regular presentations on reason-based, rational approaches to life. This meet-up thrived. Other people around the country who heard about this group wanted similar benefits.

We then decided to found [Intentional Insights](#), and this workbook is one of the products we offer. Our nonprofit also offers plenty of other products and services to help individuals evaluate reality clearly, make effective decisions, and refine and reach their goals. Those who gained the benefit of our offerings had great feedback. Here are some quotes from participants in videotaped workshops on [making decisions](#) and [evaluating reality rationally](#):

"I really enjoyed the workshop. It helped me to see some of the problems I may be employing in my thinking about life and other people... Something I gained from this workshop are tools to help me be a less stressed-out person."

- "I have gained a new perspective after attending the workshop. In order to be more analytical, I have to take into account that attention bias is everywhere. I can now further analyze and make conclusions based on evidence. With relation to the fundamental attribution error, it can give me a chance to keep a more open mind. Which will help me to relate to others more, and have a different view of the 'map' in my head."
- "From this workshop, I have gained the knowledge of how to better assess the conflicts in a situation and how to resolve the issues... The benefits of this workshop for those who participate can include: greater self-awareness, greater strategic planning, and greater satisfaction with life."

Set aside 5 to 10 minutes to complete the following

Take a few minutes to think about what is the relevance of a personal sense of meaning and purpose in life for you on an everyday level, and what you can gain from having a clear answer to the question of "What is the meaning and purpose of life for me?"

Write down your thoughts and then proceed onward.

Meaning and Purpose: Mental and Physical Well-Being

What is the benefit of finding a sense of meaning and purpose in life?

Well, research shows people who have a clear answer have better lives ([Seligman](#)). They can deal much better with both everyday life and the most challenging situations. The classic research on meaning and purpose comes from Victor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist who lived through the concentration camps of the Holocaust. He described how those who had a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives were most likely to survive and thrive in the camps. He conducted research demonstrating this both during and after his concentration camp experience ([Frankl](#)).



A strong sense of meaning and purpose has powerful benefits for mental and physical wellbeing.

Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan

Recent studies illustrate that people who feel that their life has meaning and purpose experience a substantially higher degree of mental well-being. For example, [Michael F. Steger](#), a psychologist and Director of the [Laboratory for the Study of Meaning and Quality of Life](#) at Colorado State University, found that many people gain a great deal of psychological benefit from understanding what their lives are about and how they fit within the world around them. His research demonstrates that people who have a strong sense of meaning and purpose have greater mental well-being in general. They are more satisfied on a day-to-day basis, as well as at work (Steger, Dik, and Duffy, "[Measuring Meaningful Work](#)"). Adolescents, in another

study, are shown to feel less depressed, anxious, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors the greater their search for, and sense of, meaning (Brassai, Piko, and Steger, "[Meaning in Life](#)").

A deeper sense of life meaning and purpose also predicts better physical health. Greater meaning and purpose has been associated with a reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease (Boyle et al. "[Effect of a Purpose in Life](#)"). An increased sense of life meaning and purpose correlates with reduced risk of heart attack, the leading cause of death in the United States, and stroke, another of the [top five](#) leading causes of death (Kim et al. "[Purpose in Life and Reduced Risk](#);" "[Purpose in Life and Reduced Incidence](#)"). With such benefits for mental and physical well-being, it's no wonder that a strong sense of life meaning and purpose predicts longevity, whether in the United States or around the world (Boyle et al. "[Purpose in Life](#)").

Set aside 5 to 10 minutes to complete the following

Take a few minutes to think about what kind of mental and physical health and well-being you can gain from cultivating a rich and deep sense of meaning and purpose. What specific benefits of the ones described above would you most appreciate getting, or avoiding losing?

Write down your thoughts and then proceed onward.

Meaning and Purpose: Thinkers

How do we find such meaning and purpose in life, then?

According to faith-based perspectives, the meaning and purpose of life is to be found only in God. An example of a prominent recent religious thinker is Karl Barth, one of the most important Protestant thinkers of modern times. In his [The Epistle to the Romans](#), he calls modern people's attention to God in Christ, where the true meaning and purpose of life must be found.

Another example is [The Purpose Driven Life](#) (2002), a popular book written by Rick Warren, a Christian mega church leader. Warren's book epitomizes the traditional faith-based perspective on meaning and purpose in life. In his book, he argues that the most basic question everyone faces in life is "Why am I here" and "What is my purpose?" The answer that Warren provides is that "real meaning and significance comes from understanding and fulfilling God's purposes for putting us on earth." The book describes five specific purposes that Warren claims God has for all of us: 1) We were planned for God's pleasure, and thus the first purpose is to offer real worship; 2) We were formed for God's family, and thus the second purpose is to engage in real Christian fellowship; 3) We were created to become like Christ, so the third purpose is to learn real discipleship; 4) We were shaped for serving God, so the fourth purpose is to practice real ministry; 5) We were made for a mission, so the fifth purpose is to live out real evangelism.

While Warren represents the mainstream faith-based view, some thinkers disagree with the notion that religion is the only way to find meaning and purpose in life. The prominent philosopher John Dewey argued for a pragmatic and naturalistic approach to evaluating life's big questions, such as finding meaning and purpose. He called for empirical testing and validation of any abstract claims, grounding out such claims in how they would guide behavior, and then evaluating whether such conduct would be beneficial. In other words, Dewey's approach to meaning and purpose would involve seeing how any framework of thinking about meaning and purpose actually guided human action, and then evaluating whether that action actually led to a richer and deeper sense of meaning and purpose ([Dewey](#)).

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his 1957 [Existentialism and Human Emotions](#), advances the notions of "existentialism," the philosophical perspective that all meaning and purpose originates from the individual. The challenge for modern individuals, according to Sartre, is to face all the consequences of the discovery of the absence of God. He argues that people must learn to create for themselves meaning and purpose.

The well-known philosopher Paul Kurtz argued for a new approach that he calls *eupraxsophy*. He uses the term, which literally means "good practice and wisdom," to

describe a specifically secular and non-religious approach to life. In the tradition of Dewey, he argued for a pragmatic, naturalistic, and empirically validated approach to human values and big life questions, including meaning and purpose in life. Kurtz specifically emphasized the important role of placing humanity within its context of the natural world while also orienting toward hope and optimism about the future ([Kurtz](#)).

A more recent prominent thinker is Greg Epstein. In his 2010 [Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe](#), he advocates striving for dignity as a means of finding “meaning to life beyond God.” According to Epstein, “we are not wicked, debased, helpless creatures waiting for a heavenly king or queen to bless us with strength, wisdom, and love. We have the potential for strength, wisdom, and love inside ourselves. But by ourselves we are not enough. We need to reach out beyond ourselves – to the world that surrounds us and sustains us, and most especially to other people. This is dignity” (93).

Sam Harris, in his book, [Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion](#) (2014), states that “Separating spirituality from religion is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It is to assert two important truths simultaneously: Our world is riven by dangerous religious doctrines that all educated people should condemn, and yet there is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit” (6).

Likewise, in his 2015 books [Atheist Meditation](#) and [Atheist Spirituality](#) and [Exploring Your Life: Mindfulness Meditation and Secular Spirituality](#), Mark W. Gura agrees with Harris that atheists and humanists can use meditation as a means to access secular forms of spirituality, to attain stress-release and self-actualization without beliefs, or faith in God(s), pseudoscience or the supernatural, but he goes a step further. Gura argues that secular meditation can also produce a psychological state of mind that is, in-and-of-itself, a source of meaning and purpose, if meditation is used as the source of contentment in one's life. Gura's point is that sources of meaning and purpose that are external to ourselves change, expire, and are likely to disappoint us, while secular forms of meditation can provide an internal equilibrium that is under our own control.

Are they correct? Can we have meaning and purpose, which fall within the sphere that Harris and Gura refer to as spirituality and Epstein terms dignity, without belonging to a religious community?

Set aside 5 to 10 minutes to complete the following

Take a few minutes to think about which of the perspectives described above speaks most strongly to your personal beliefs and worldview, and why. How does your particular worldview bear upon your sense of meaning and purpose in life?

Write down your thoughts and then proceed onward.

The Science of Meaning and Purpose

What does the research show? First, it is vital to recognize that studies do indicate that a strong religious belief correlates with a rich sense of meaning and purpose. Research on the psychology of religion illustrates that “for many, the most salient core psychological function of religion is to provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life” ([Batson and Stocks](#), 149). Survey-based studies affirm such individually-oriented psychological research. For example a study of the population of Memphis found that the extent to which religion has salience in a person’s life correlates with a heightened sense of meaning and purpose (Petersen and Roy, [“Religiosity, Anxiety, and Meaning and Purpose”](#)). Another study used the General Social Survey, which tracks demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions across the United States. The researcher investigated how the degree of belief in God relates to a personal sense of life purpose. The data showed that people who indicated they are confident in the existence of God self-report a higher sense of life purpose compared to those who believe but occasionally doubt, and to nonbelievers (Cranney, [“Do People Who Believe in God Report More Meaning in Their Lives?”](#)).

Parallels exist in global comparative research on religion and life purpose. One study encompassed 79 countries, using the World Values Survey. It found that more religious people in more religious countries experience a greater sense of life satisfaction across a variety of dimensions, including life meaning and purpose (Okulicz-Kozaryna, [“Religiosity and Life Satisfaction Across Nations”](#)). A 2007 survey by Gallup of 84 countries used the following question: “Do you feel your life has an important meaning or purpose?” The report on this survey highlighted the following as the brief summary: “Takeaway: Regardless of whether they affiliate themselves with a religion, more than 8 in 10 respondents across 84 countries say their lives have an important meaning or purpose. However, religion does make a difference: Those who claim no religious affiliation are more than twice as likely as those who do claim one to say they do not feel their lives have an important purpose” (Crabtree and B. Pelham, [“The Complex Relationship Between Religion and Purpose”](#)).

Such generalized takeaways provide support for mainstream opinions and religion-oriented thinkers who use such findings to support their claims that religion is the way to gain meaning and purpose. Yet digging deeper into the data raises questions about the evidence for such claims. For example, the study cited above on 79 countries also found that more religious people have less life satisfaction, including a sense of meaning and purpose, in less religious countries. Moreover, forms of worship that do not promote social connectedness do not correlate with a heightened sense of life satisfaction. Other studies illustrate similar findings. For instance, religious affiliation with community belonging leads to a higher degree of life satisfaction than religious devotion in private settings ([Bergan and McConatha, “Religiosity and Life Satisfaction”](#)). Another investigation underscored that extrinsic religious devotion, meaning a focus on religion for means such as in-group participation and social status,

correlates with higher happiness and life meaning. However, intrinsic religious orientation, defined as religion that is deeply personal and defining one's lifestyle, does not correlate with a greater sense of happiness and life meaning (Sillick and Cathcart, "[The Relationship Between Religious Orientation and Happiness](#)"). These results show that socially-oriented religious practice in religious communities leads to a stronger sense of life meaning and purpose, while private and inner-oriented religious practice does not. In that case, is it religion or social and community bonds that lead to a deep sense of life meaning?



Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan

Research conclusively demonstrates that social affiliation is key to a deep sense of life purpose, regardless of religious affiliation. As an example, 4 studies showed significant correlation between whether people experience a sense of belonging and their perception of life meaning and purpose. Study 1 highlighted a correlation between questions asking for a sense of belonging and life purpose at the same time. Study 2 strove to remove the possible biasing that may occur by asking these questions at the same time. It first asked people about their sense of belonging, and 3 weeks later inquired into their sense of life meaning. The data was similarly indicative of a clear correlation between belonging and life meaning. Studies 3 and 4 primed participants to experience a sense of belonging and a variety of other experiences, and found that priming people to experience belonging resulted in the highest perception of life meaning for study participants (Lambert et. al., "[To Belong Is to Matter](#)"). A meta-review of many studies on life meaning and purpose similarly indicates social belonging

as vital to a sense of life purpose (Steger, [“Making Meaning”](#)).

Such findings should not be surprising. Much recent social neuroscience underscores the vital role of social bonds for how our brains function. Indeed, our brain is inherently designed to be sociable, as part of our evolutionary development. The force of evolution selected for mutations that make our brains more social, as human ancestors best survived in groups, and those most capable of being socially oriented tended to outcompete those who were not. Thus, social neuroscience research indicates that when we engage with others, we experience an intimate brain to brain linkup. That neural bridge lets us affect the brain and thus the body of everyone we engage with, just as they do to us. The more strongly we connect with someone emotionally, the greater the mutual force. The resulting feelings have far-reaching consequences that ripple throughout our body, as our brain releases hormones that regulate all biological systems. A sense of meaning and purpose is thus neurologically correlated to social connectedness, and consequently our mental and physical well-being ([Goleman](#)).

In fact, research shows that the important thing is simply to *have* a sense of meaning and purpose in life, regardless of the source of the purpose . Going back to Frankl, his research suggests the crucial thing for individuals surviving and thriving is to develop a personal sense of individual purpose and confidence in a collective purpose for society itself, what he terms the “will-to-meaning and purpose.” Frankl himself worked to help people find meaning and purpose in their lives. He did so by helping prisoners in concentration camps, and later patients in his private practice as a psychiatrist, to remember their joys, sorrows, sacrifices, and blessings, thereby bringing to mind the meaning and purposefulness of their lives as already lived. According to Frankl, meaning and purpose can be found in any situation within which people find themselves. He emphasizes the existential meaning and purposefulness of suffering and tragedy in life as testimonies to human courage and dignity, as exemplified both in the concentration camps and beyond. Frankl argues that not only is life charged with meaning and purpose, but this meaning and purpose implies responsibility, namely the responsibility upon oneself to discover meaning and purpose, both as an individual and as a member of a larger social collective.



Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan

Frankl's approach to psychotherapy came to be called [logotherapy](#), and forms part of a broader therapeutic practice known as existential psychotherapy. This philosophically-informed therapy stems from the notion that internal tensions and conflicts stem from one's confrontation with the challenges of the nature of life itself, and relate back to the notions brought up by Sartre and other existentialist philosophers. These challenges, according to Irvin Yalom in his *Existential Psychotherapy*, include: facing the reality and the responsibility of our freedom; dealing with the inevitability of death; the stress of individual isolation; finally, the difficulty of finding meaning in life ([Yalom](#)). These four issues correlate to what existential therapy holds as the four key dimensions of human existence, the physical, social, personal and spiritual realms, based on extensive psychological research and therapy practice ([Cooper](#); [Mathers](#)).

So then why do studies show that a sense of life meaning and purpose correlates with religion? One reason is that so much of the research on this question has been conducted in the United States. And it just so happens that in the United States, religious communities have come to provide the kind of things that contribute to a sense of life meaning and purpose.

For example, in the contemporary United States, religion is the main venue that provides strong social and community connections. Likewise, within religious circles in the United States, there is much more focus on finding meaning and purpose, and clear answers are provided. The prominent anthropologist Clifford Geertz specifically described religion as a system for helping people find meaning and purpose through giving answers to the problem of the existence of chaos and suffering ([Geertz](#)). Furthermore, religion has been [one of the](#)

most common sources of ritual experiences, especially in the United States. Research on rituals shows their importance in maintaining and transmitting cultural values, including what a specific culture perceives as the key elements of meaning and purpose. Scholars also highlight how rituals serve as a vital contributor to social bonding and community belonging. Religious communities also provide many opportunities for serving others. These three factors – reflection on life’s basic questions, strong community and social ties, and civic engagement – are the three key sources of how people acquire a strong sense of meaning and purpose, according to the research.



Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan

Other societies with less religious predominance in the public sphere do not necessarily suffer from a lesser sense of meaning and purpose ([McMahon](#)). While in the US, religion is a predominant if weakening social force, this is not the case for all other societies, either today or in the past. Plenty of other societies had and have much less religious presence in the public sphere. Purpose and meaning also do not correlate with levels of wealth – surprisingly, many contemporary poorer countries have a greater average sense of meaning and purpose among their citizenry than those in rich countries (Oishi and Diener, [“Residents of Poor Nations Have a Greater Sense of Meaning in Life”](#)).

How do people in more secularly-oriented societies than the United States gain a sense of meaning and purpose? Well, here is an example. Mike met regularly with friends and acquaintances from his neighborhood in a large building. There, he enjoyed listening to

presentations about big life questions: on the meaning of life, on the nature of morality, on ethical behavior, etc. He participated in study circles that engaged with these questions in more depth. Mike sang, danced, and enjoyed musical performances there. Together with others, he volunteered to help clean up the streets and build housing for poor people in the neighborhood. Through these activities, Mike gained social bonds and community connections, a chance to serve others, and an opportunity to reflect on life's big questions – all the components that lead to a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Mike's full name is not Michael, but Mikhail, and his experience describes the prototypical experience of former Soviet citizens in state-sponsored community activities. The former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev described in his [memoirs](#) how much he and other Soviet citizens enjoyed such events: according to him, “everybody was keen to participate” (35). The Soviet Union is typically perceived as a militaristic and grey society, with a government that oriented all of its efforts to taking over the world. [Well, that's simply not true](#), as the Soviet authorities put a lot of effort into providing its citizens with opportunities to find meaning and purpose in life, as well as fun and pleasure – although they also certainly wanted to spread communism throughout the world, and put a lot of efforts into this goal as well (Tsipursky, [“Active and Conscious;” “Having Fun”](#)).



This early 1960s photograph shows a performance from a scene in a Soviet opera, named “Arkhimed,” held at a Soviet club. The photograph comes from the private archive of M. A.

Lebedeva. For more on “Arkhimed,” see my scholarly work (Tsipursky, [“Having Fun”](#)).

To understand how the USSR’s government helped its citizens gain a greater sense of meaning and purpose, [I spent](#) a decade investigating government reports in archives across the Soviet Union, exploring national and local newspapers, read memoirs and diaries, and interviewed more than fifty former Soviet citizens. The answer: to a large extent, through [government-sponsored community and cultural centers called kluby \(clubs\)](#). In many ways these venues replaced the social function provided by churches, offering Soviet citizens social and community connections, chances for serving others, and venues to reflect on meaning and purpose in life, in a setting that combined state sponsorship with grassroots engagement. Soviet clubs also hosted rituals and celebrations, which served to help people enjoy themselves and find meaning and purpose, and also to further the government’s political agenda (Tsipursky, [“Integration, Celebration”](#)).



This photograph shows a banquet held after a performance of “Arkhimed.” The photograph also comes from the private archive of M. A. Lebedeva.

Present-day societies with a more secular orientation than the United States have similar stories to tell, as illustrated by research on contemporary Denmark and Sweden. Most Danes and Swedes do not worship any god. At the same time these countries score at the very top of the “happiness index,” have very low crime and corruption rates, great educational systems, strong economies, well-supported arts, free health care, and egalitarian social policies. They have a wide variety of strong social institutions that provide community connections, opportunities for serving others, and other benefits that religion provides in the United States

[\(Zuckerman\)](#).

From another cultural perspective, a significant strain in Eastern worldviews holds the search for meaning and purpose itself as irrelevant. For instance, Legalism, a Chinese philosophical tradition, rejected the notion that one should even try to find a purpose in life, and focused only on pragmatic knowledge. A more prominent and better-known Chinese belief system, Confucianism, holds that one should find meaning and purpose in everyday existence, focusing on being instead of doing, and not devote much effort to finding meaning and purpose outside of this everyday experience ([Tu](#)).

Informed by an Eastern-based philosophy, Alan Watts promoted the idea to western audiences that the sense of self is an illusion, that we are all part of a larger whole. He advocated abandoning the search for an individual meaning and purpose, which he perceived as a harmful western cultural construct ([Watts](#)).

Another Eastern-informed perspective comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn. This prominent scholar and popularizer of meditation and mindfulness proposed relying on these practices to find your life purpose. Specifically, he discussed the importance of meditating on our personal vision and blueprint of what is most important in life in order to grasp our innermost values ([Kabat-Zinn](#)).

As you see, there are a wide variety of perspectives on meaning and purpose. Believing in God and going to church is far from the only way to attain these qualities. You can gain them in non-religious venues that provide opportunities for community ties and a chance to reflect on life meaning and purpose, just as religious communities have traditionally offered.

Furthermore, research indicates that those who [engage with such deep questions](#) in a setting that does not expect conformity to a specific dogma overall gain a deeper perception of meaning and purpose (Wong, [“Meaning in Life”](#)). In other words, the most impactful sense of meaning and purpose stems from an intentional analysis of one’s self understanding and path in life and a consequent experience of [personal agency, the quality of living intentionally](#). To be clear, one can find deep meaning and purpose from belief in a higher power, but it is best if one comes to that conclusion oneself after deep self-reflection and analysis, as opposed to just conforming to group and social norms. Yet in the United States there are few non-explicitly religious channels to reflect on life meaning and purpose. This workbook provides one such channel, drawing on academic studies as does all Intentional Insights content. The next section lists specific research-based strategies and exercises for gaining purpose and meaning in life.

Set aside 5 to 10 minutes to complete the following

Take a few minutes to think about how this information about the research on meaning

and purpose impacts your own perspective on your personal sense of meaning and purpose.
Write down your thoughts and then proceed onward.

Further Reading

Happy to see that you reached the conclusion of the free version of the book! To learn about specific science-based strategies and exercises to find meaning and purpose in life, check out the premium version, available [here on Amazon](#). Below is the Table of Contents for the additional sections in the premium version:

- Meaning and Purpose: Research-Based Strategies: 30
- Strategies: Highest-Order Goals: 31
- Strategies: Life Vision: 34
- Strategies: Self-Reflection: 36
- Strategies: Social and Community Connections: 42
- Strategies: Serving Others: 46
- Strategies: Meaningful Work: 51
- Strategies: Reflecting on Purpose and Meaning with Others: 56
- Strategies: Making a Specific Plan: 60
- Activities to Gain a Stronger Sense of Meaning and Purpose: 61
- Conclusion: 63
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- Intentional Insights Starter Package: Values and Meanings Group: 70
- Intentional Insights Starter Package: Rationality Group: 94

Whether you buy the premium version of the book or not, I want to encourage you to use the various resources available to you as you cultivate your personal sense of meaning and purpose. You can engage in virtual discussion of meaning and purpose in life on Intentional Insights [blog posts](#) and [videos](#) dedicated to this topic. We created an [online class](#) dedicated to helping you find purpose and meaning together with others. We are working on a Facebook group where you can build virtual community bonds, reflect on purpose and meaning, and help others find their life purpose. We are also making a web and mobile app where you can input your MPQ and track the progression of your sense of meaning and purpose over time. We can send a weekly reminder e-mail for you to retake your MPQ and do your planning revisions. We offer the option to do spot-checking of the MPQ, as well as reviewing journaling notes, reviewing your plan and its revisions, etc., and providing references that might help you optimize your search for meaning and purpose. For all of these services, e-mail us at info@intentionalinsights.org. Our [resources page](#) lists some high-quality non-Intentional

Insights resources that you can use to help yourself gain greater meaning and purpose. Our [newsletter](#) provides much more information and special offers available only to subscribers. So do the Intentional Insights [Facebook Page](#), [Twitter](#), and [Pinterest](#), which provide an opportunity to engage with both InIn core participants and other people like you looking to cultivate a richer sense of life purpose.

Good luck on your journey to find greater purpose and meaning in life! I would love to hear back from you about your experience – visit us at www.intentionalinsights.org and our social media to share what you learned, to provide feedback on what you gained and on how we can improve our content, to access our additional resources, and engage with other like-minded folks working to [gain greater personal agency](#) and have an intentional life. If you found this book impactful for you, please consider leaving an honest review on its [Amazon page](#) to let others know about your experience. Also, please share about this book and other Intentional Insights resources with others who you think might benefit from them. They will thank you for it! For bulk order discounts, get in touch with us at info@intentionalinsights.org. I would be personally eager to hear about your thoughts at gleb@intentionalinsights.org, and also on my personal [Facebook page](#) and [Twitter](#). I hope this book helps you and others you know find your purpose using science!

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