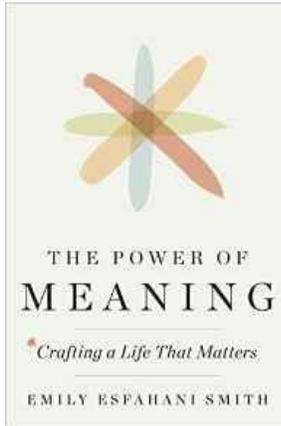


Pillars of Meaning



The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters

By: Emily Esfahani Smith

Crown

ISBN: 978-0553419993

304 pages

Reviewed by Leland R. Beaumont

For many years a good friend of mine hung a sign in his office advising him to find: “Something, to do, someone to love, and something to hope for.” Perhaps we all seek meaning in our lives; “for as long as human beings have existed, they have yearned to know what makes life worth living.”

As more people realize that religious dogma is not the path to meaningful lives we may be cast adrift, or we may seek effective paths toward meaning. Author Emily Esfahani Smith provides useful insights as we seek our own meaningful path through life. “With meaning no longer imposed on us from an outside source, we have to create it for ourselves.”

Paths to meaning cannot run directly through happiness. Paradoxically, chasing happiness actually makes people unhappy. Unearned happiness does not bring us joy. A chief research finding is that there is a distinction between a *happy* life and a *meaningful* life. While *hedonism* refers to happiness, Aristotle used the ancient Greek word *eudaimonia* to refer to “human flourishing.” “Leading a eudaimonic life, Aristotle argued, requires cultivating the best qualities within you both morally and intellectually and living up to your potential.” If *hedonia* is defined by *feeling* good, then researchers argue that *eudaimonia* is defined by *being* and *doing* good.

In searching for the essential elements of meaning, Smith studied Sufi rituals, the work of several philosophers, great literature, positive psychology, student interviews, mythology, *Life* magazine, and other sources. Four themes presented themselves again and again throughout her search. She identifies these four pillars of meaning as: belonging, purpose, storytelling, and transcendence. Each chapter dedicated to exploring one of these pillars brings the ideas to life through the experiences of real people.

Tiny Tangier Island in the Chesapeake Bay provides a prototype for the pillar of *belonging*. As one resident explained, “There are 480 people on this island, and we all know each other.” People feel they belong when they are in relationships based on mutual care, and they have frequent pleasant

interactions with other people. “Close relationships and high quality connections share an important feature in common: both require us to focus on others.”

The second pillar is *purpose*—a “stable and far-reaching” goal we are constantly working toward that involves a contribution to the world. Although zookeepers spend much of their day mucking out stalls, they have an unusually strong sense of purpose. Zookeepers are willing to sacrifice pay, time, comfort, and status because they believe they have a duty to use their gifts to help vulnerable creatures in captivity lead better lives. You may find purpose “where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Storytelling—the third pillar of meaning— “is fundamental to the human search for meaning, whether we tell tales of the creation of the earth or our own early choices.” Storytelling helps us understand our lives as *coherent*. When crafting our stories we have the chance to focus on the most extraordinary events of our lives, both good and bad. People who believe their lives are meaningful tend to tell stories defined by growth, communion, and agency. Our stories endow mere facts with meaning.

Transcendence is the power “to go beyond” or “to climb”. One night at the McDonald Observatory in Fort Davis, Texas hundreds of people gazing at thousands of stars in the night sky felt awe as they recognized they were one small part of an unimaginably vast universe. “The abject humility we experience when we realize that we are nothing but tiny flecks in a vast and incomprehensible universe paradoxically fills us with a deep and powerful sense of meaning.”

In the final chapters, Smith draws on her background in positive psychology to explore how these pillars of meaning can help us overcome adversity, grow through resilience, and create cultures of meaning.

Pleasant stories and rigorous research meld into this readable and authoritative treatment of an important and timely topic.