



Something missing?

The key to finding purpose in life

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Meeting up with people you were at school with years ago is always risky. There's always someone there who has the job/looks/family/house/holidays that you dreamed of but never quite managed to get. You probably know the experience of meeting someone from your past and feeling like... well, like you've missed out somehow.

Unless, of course, you're the kind of person who has the dream job/looks/family/house/holidays. In which case, congratulations!

Or... maybe not.

Not long ago, I was at a school reunion and talking to an old schoolmate. We replayed for each other the 35 years since we'd left school. He'd done really well. Certainly, when it came to looks and house and holidays, the years had been kinder to him than to me. But then he said something that took me aback:

"I've spent my life just going from one thing to another. I've just lived."

In other words, he'd got most of what everyone says you should aim for in life, but there was still something missing. It felt to him like life had been a bit empty—like it had been a bit of an anticlimax, a bit unfulfilling. What was it all *for*?

Perhaps you can relate. Perhaps you know that there is definitely something missing, and you think you know what it is that you need to get and grasp. A different job.

A new relationship. A better standard of living. Get that, and maybe you'll finally feel fulfilled in life.

Or maybe you, like my friend, have achieved all those things, and... actually, they've not delivered what they promised. There's still something missing. What is it all *for*?

Here is the problem. All of us hope that our life means something—that it is for something. We want to make the most of it, to make a difference, to leave a legacy, to build something worthwhile. Having a sense of purpose in life is what gets us out of bed in the morning and what pulls us through the tough times. But what actually is your purpose beyond just living, beyond “just going from one thing to another”?

And if you do find a purpose—a sense of meaning and fulfilment—is it one that can survive you eventually dying?

The fact is that things end. Years come and go. Seasons of life pass by. And life itself flickers and ultimately fades. It sounds depressing, but it's true. Death mocks everything we achieve and accomplish and accumulate. How do you tend to respond to thinking about it? We can deny it, and live for a while as though it won't happen. We can downplay it, describing it in ways that make it sound less final (we pass away, we go upstairs, we become an angel or a star in the sky). Or we can despair about it, because it drains purpose from our life and there's nothing we can do about it.

That's the approach that John-Paul Sartre, the 20th-century atheist philosopher, took. He was remarkably unafraid of looking at the reality of death and drawing the logical conclusions of his beliefs. He wrote in his novel *Nausea*:

Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable monotonous addition.

How do you feel about that view? I think that few of us want Sartre to be right! Not many people really want to live as though there is no real reason for existing, no meaning to be found in all our successes and struggles. Yet, if life ends with death, then Sartre has a point. We're just going from one thing to another, as my old school-friend put it, until the day when the next thing we get to is the last thing.

So to find meaning in life, we need an answer to death.

The last place you'd look

There was a day in history when the man at the heart of what became known as Christianity looked like the last place we should look to find that answer. It was a day when it looked as if that man, Jesus of Nazareth, had experienced the reality that Sartre

believed in. Jesus had lived for 33 years. He had done some remarkable things. He had made some insightful and profound and, at times, controversial statements. He had spoken with and befriended a huge range of people, from the wealthy to the poor, from freedom fighters to fishermen, from priests to prostitutes. He'd made some incredible claims—claims to be the King whom the Creator of the world had promised to send into the world; claims to have the answers to the deepest questions of life and to be able to give a satisfying, fulfilling life not just now but for ever; claims to actually be the Creator himself. As he had gone through life, going from one thing to another, a lot of those things had been remarkable.

But then he'd died.

On that Friday, as he hung on a Roman cross, killed as a condemned criminal, it looked as if the view that Sartre held was right. There had, in the end, been no rhyme or reason to Jesus' life. It was just another monotonous addition to history, with no meaning. He'd been buried in a tomb and his claims had died with him. It was all over.

Jesus seemed like the last place to look for any answers when it comes to death.

That was on a Friday. But Sunday was coming...