

Psyche & Soul 9

LIVING WITH MEANING AND PURPOSE

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Podcast Link:

<https://anchor.fm/boscom/episodes/2-9-Psyche--Soul---LIVING-WITH-MEANING-AND-PURPOSE-25-eip7u8>

Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha centre, Jeolikote, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

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“I don’t find any meaning in my life. I wonder why I am living like this. Just dragging myself on from day to day. Sometime I wish I were dead” so said the 28-year old Sunita during a personal meeting with me at a seminar.

Sunita is not the only one who feels this way. There are many like her who find it difficult to experience a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Quite a few of these persons gradually sink into clinical depression and sometimes think of ending their life and even attempt to do so. This is very much true during these days of the Covid-19 lockdown, when things that gave meaning to one’s life may no longer be available.

Recent research on health and happiness show that a sense of meaning in life is one of the major contributors to emotional and physical wellbeing. Emotionally healthy persons find life a meaningful adventure. They have something that gives meaning and significance to their life, such as an ideology, a dream, a commitment. According to the pioneering personality psychologist, Gordon Allport, “one of the key challenges to maturity is to invest daily life with meaning—to find or create opportunities to make our lives matter”

Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychologist who has researched happiness and wellbeing for over 25 years observes in her book *“The How of Happiness”* that having goals in and of themselves is strongly associated with health and happiness. Persons working toward a personally significant goal are far happier than those who do not have such dreams or aspirations. Having goals gives us a feeling of control over our lives and bolsters our self-esteem. It directly influences our physical and mental health.

When we do not find purpose and meaningfulness, we become vulnerable to the onslaughts of ill-health, both physical and mental. However, when we have these, we can triumph over any tragedy. Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the horrors of the concentration camp at Auschwitz, has built up a whole philosophy around meaningfulness. What helped him to escape alive from Auschwitz, while almost all of his fellow inmates perished, was a dream he cherished: his determination to be with his wife again. While the others lost hope, his dream sustained him and enabled him to survive. A central message in his later writings is a quote from Nietzsche “If you have a *WHY* to live for, you can live any *HOW*.” In other words, if we have meaning and purpose, something to live for, then we will face and triumph over any adversity. As the popular song “The Impossible Dream” from the musical “Man of La Mancha” says it: we can “march through hell for a heavenly cause.”

Trauma and tragedy are part of the human condition. Those who have something to live for will find it much easier to triumph over these. They will be able not only to make sense of these, but also create something beautiful out of them. Great artists were able to triumph over the tragedies that befell them, because their passion for their art sustained them. These artists have created some of their most appreciated masterpieces in the midst of great suffering. There is, for example, great poignancy and sensitivity in Beethoven's *String Quartets* composed during the years of intense pain and anguish.

One research on bereaved parents found that one of the processes that helped parents whose children were murdered to heal from their trauma was making sense of the tragedy that had befallen them. Creating meaning out of the tragedy was for them a transformational experience. Many of these parents would go on to set up foundations in memory of their loved ones that would benefit a large number of parents who have lost a son or daughter, as well as society at large. This reaching out was one way they were able to restore meaning and purpose that had been destroyed by the tragic event.

According to personality psychologist Dan McAdams, two dynamics contribute significantly to finding meaning and purpose, especially after misfortune: a) transform or redeem bad events into good outcomes, and (b) set goals for the future that benefit society.

Reaching out to others, making others' lives significant is one of the major ways that we can bring meaningfulness into our own lives. This is something that we can do even during these days of the Covid lockdown.

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We could now take a few moments to ask ourselves: What gives meaning and purpose to my life? If I am experiencing meaninglessness at this time, what is it I can do to create meaning and purpose?

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There is a scene in the Gospel of John at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry where two disciples of John the Baptist are walking behind Jesus. After a while, Jesus turns back toward them and asks them: "What do you want?" That is a question that each of us needs to answer from time to time. We could now imagine that scene, place ourselves in the place of the disciples and tell Jesus what we are looking for. We could listen to what he tells us in response and spend a few minutes in his company.

..... Have a pleasant weekend. Be well. Be safe. Be blessed.