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# Once You Have It All, What's Next?



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

## **Where to look for answers to the existential questions many of us grapple with.**

Derek had always been a poster child for executive success. An excellent student in high school, he moved effortlessly to an Ivy League school. During his studies, he met his future wife and married soon after graduation. Having worked a few years at a premier consulting firm, Derek decided to do an MBA in a top business school. He then joined a major investment bank on Wall Street, where he became a partner in record time. While climbing the corporate ladder, he also became the proud father of three daughters.

Derek always seemed to be very focused, both at work and at home. Although he did not clearly articulate it, being an excellent provider was his main purpose in life. Things changed, however, when his youngest daughter left for college. He became troubled by feelings of emptiness and a sense of aimlessness. He wondered what had happened to his past confidence and sense of purpose. Deep down, he felt that he had very little to live for. Looking back, he realised that he had not fully savoured the time with his

children as work had been too time consuming. He also found himself disconnected from his wife. In short, having fulfilled his biological destiny, Derek found himself adrift.

Derek is not the only one struggling with questions of meaning. It's a theme that troubles many people at later stages of life. Empty nesters need to take a fresh look at their lives – including their marriage – and they don't always like what they see. No wonder those over 50 experience a [peak in divorce rates](#).

### **Longer lives requires us to find new meaning**

In 1897, Paul Gauguin was 49 years old when he finished a painting which he called [Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?](#) From what we can understand from his letters, the painting is a meditation on birth, life and death, using themes from Tahitian mythology. It tackles fundamental questions about the roots and meaning of the human existence. Gauguin considered this painting, created at a time of a great personal distress, to be his masterpiece.

As Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote, “The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.” In other words, the purpose of life is a life of purpose. If we know why we are here; if we have a reason for our existence – we feel more connected, more alive. Greater purpose has been linked to a more positive outlook on life, greater happiness, more satisfaction and greater self-esteem. Our psychological state may also influence our ability to fight disease. A sense of purpose may also serve as a buffer against age vicissitudes. Older people who work towards meaningful goals may age better.

Conversely, a lack of purpose may leave us vulnerable to depression, anxiety and substance abuse. It may even lead to a marital crisis. Therefore, it's important to constantly ask ourselves: Who am I? Why am I here? What is life all about? What's the meaning of my life? True enough, most of us have moments (unbidden or through conscious intent) when we seek answers to these questions and feel we should account for our existence.

### **Beyond biological imperatives**

From an evolutionary point of view, the primary purpose of life is the continuation of life. A biological programme for survival and reproduction

underwrites the complex cycles of life, in which death is the great equaliser. But after we have passed on our genes to the next generation, the existential question emerges: What's next?

It could be said that this question haunts us more than ever as we now **live much longer**. We are not like the Pacific salmon which swim upstream to spawn, only to die immediately afterwards. As Derek's example illustrates, the life of Homo sapiens is far less straightforward. The extension of life expectancy has expanded our existential vacuum.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that for optimal wellbeing, we need to make a distinction between *hedonia* and *eudaimonia*. Hedonia refers to those subjective needs whose satisfaction leads to momentary pleasure. Eudaimonia, by contrast, is a more objective state of wellbeing, standing for a life well-lived. According to Aristotle, wellbeing consists of more than momentary pleasures. To attain true happiness and wellness, we need to actualise our potential and ensure that our life has been worthwhile. Meaningfulness starts with the understanding of who we are and how we fit into our world.

### **Taking responsibility for our lives**

In the past, many people found meaning and comfort in religion. But as its role in contemporary society has been decreasing, it has become more difficult to find in religion existential answers to why we are here. This doesn't mean that we should avoid the question of existence.

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl noted, through his own experience in a concentration camp, that the prisoners with the greatest chance of survival were not the most physically fit, but those with the strongest belief system. He observed that once a prisoner lost hope, he or she was doomed. It was their ability to find meaning that sustained those who survived. In his book *The Will to Meaning*, Frankl argues that life has no meaning unless we actively create an existential purpose. Thus, apart from our biological imperative, our primary drive in life is the discovery and pursuit of what we personally find meaningful.

From an existential point of view, Derek's depressive reactions not only make him more aware of his mortality, but also challenge him to break out of a self-imposed straightjacket. He needs to realise that we are not simply the product of heredity and environment. We also possess the ability to make

decisions – to take responsibility for our own lives.

Now that his children are independent, Derek must rediscover a sense of worth and purpose. He would do well to reflect on the past, the present and the future. And actively seek out what it is that moves his inner self. After all, if he doesn't know who he is, he will never find answers. Looking forward, he needs to focus on what he loves. He needs to develop knowledge and skills in the service of that which will make him feel alive in the long run. However, apart from eudaimonia – concerns about a life well lived – Derek should not forget to pay attention to hedonia through creating happy experiences and moments.

### **Broadening our quest for meaning**

For Aristotle and Frankl, what matters most in life is purpose. And this need for purpose becomes even more relevant when retirement looms – when we can no longer rely upon regular work to give us daily structure. If the question of purpose is unanswered, life will remain superficial and empty, despite an overflow of material abundance.

Individuals with a high sense of purpose, who can find new ways of achieving meaning, have the recipe for successful ageing. This comes with a key insight: The purpose of life is to live for others. Communing with the world, losing ourselves in what is not us, can create a great sense of satisfaction. Building on this, we find another concern of the greatest importance – the symbiotic relationship between personal wellbeing and the collective wellness of humanity and that of the planet.

Thus, once we have done it all and had it all, it is time to ask ourselves how to align the factors that foster our individual wellbeing with those that facilitate wellness at a collective or global level. As the South African rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu once said, “My humanity is bound up in yours, for we only can be human together.”

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