
Creating a Meaningful Life in Turbulent Times



By Linda Brimm , INSEAD Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour

How can accessing our sources of personal meaning help us manage mounting insecurity in our lives, families and work?

Whether we are nomadic or geographically rooted, our lives need to feel meaningful over time. The questions “What does my life mean? What am I all about?” are crucial for psychological health. Given the turbulent times that we live in – marked by economic uncertainty, rising nationalism and looming climate crisis – these questions are becoming even more pertinent as our sense of global security erodes.

Who am I? Who am I becoming? Do I like what I see? As we go through different stages of our lives, multiple factors can influence how we see that story developing. It is a complex mixture of the personal, the professional, the socio-cultural and relational forces that contribute to the definition and redefinition of personal meaning in our lives.

Global Cosmopolitans, the group of global professionals that I have studied for my last two books (and my third book, which is a work in progress), are a talented population of highly educated multilingual people who have lived,

worked and often studied for extensive periods in different cultures. This experience heightens their understanding that with every turn of the 'kaleidoscope of life', they are faced with the interactivity of change and how it can impact other facets of their lives. While navigating the challenges of a global life – and reaping its benefits – they make complex decisions as they create new life chapters that also affect the various sources of meaning in their lives. For them, meaning is far from static.

While each life composition is personalised and evolving, the challenge of nurturing personal meaning is especially salient for Global Cosmopolitans. Without the social constructions of one culture that can implicitly define personal meaning, they face the creative, often difficult task of inventing alternatives. Sometimes without even realising it, these professionals strive to coalesce in a coherent way their culturally hybridised, globe-hopping lives. In doing so, they blaze a trail for a much wider group of people not included in this study.

In order for a larger cohort to learn from the stories of Global Cosmopolitans, I have attempted to articulate and name certain sources of personal definition and meaning. These sources are complex and intertwined. Whoever we are, our identity story is carefully woven through shifting commitments, relationships and perspectives. These can begin to provide a provisional checklist as people consider the impact of creating their next life chapter.

Identity: While “the professional me” and the ability to create and achieve motivating goals can be central to a sense of identity for the individuals I have studied, other roles in life and the internal experience of who one is (or is becoming) can contribute significantly to a sense of well-being. Key constructs of identity can shift in importance and relevance as one matures.

The centrality of one aspect of identity can be thrown off when life decisions alter the image in one's personal kaleidoscope. Global moves often highlight gaps or changes in self-knowledge, such as an attachment to cultural and spiritual traditions or values. Deciding to move to a place called home or refusing another global transfer can raise questions such as “How global am I?” It can also provoke questions about whether a move allows us to use the skills that are core to our identity and ability to contribute in a meaningful way.

The relational self: Our identity and our relationships with others are intertwined. These bonds help shape us, providing emotional, moral and practical structure to our lives. Being a good enough life partner, child or parent are crucial pieces of the puzzle.

Having children, for example, can significantly change one's self-definition or even purpose in life. It can force us to mull over the transmission of essential values and sources of meaning to the next generation. Similarly, caring for family and friends, for example, both reaffirms values and creates rituals and moments that impose order on our lives. Global Cosmopolitans often feel painfully distant from family and the friends they made along the way. When someone close to them dies, they may mourn twice – both for the death and for the loss of self-image as someone who is there for consequential people and life events.

The belonging self: This dimension of selfhood raises the questions, “Where do I belong and feel at home? Does place matter?” For Global Cosmopolitans, “home” can have little to do with the colour of their passports. After all, they may not have returned to their birth country for years, if not decades. Global Cosmopolitans highlight the significance of defining for oneself what it means to belong, to create a sense of being at home and to have values that contribute to a sense of meaning, independently of one's roots in a country of origin.

Lively discussions ensue when Global Cosmopolitans discuss belonging, home and the import of place. Definitions vary considerably. At different points in time, family members recount how going or not going home can weigh on the belonging self. Global Cosmopolitans frequently describe difficult decisions that revolve around being a good enough family member while following professional possibilities, dreams or even major projects that give importance to life. These decisions, after all, may compromise what other family members want or need to give *their* lives meaning.

The responsible and impactful self: Where and how can I make a difference or have an impact when it counts? Am I able to align my goals and my skills with my values and sense of social responsibility?

Most of us want to feel that our lives have made a difference, that the world is better off for us having been in it. One's definition of how to do that can change over time. For many Global Cosmopolitans, the need and desire to have an impact on global concerns is very immediate, and the scope (where

and how) can be globally defined. But it can be more difficult when one's life and loyalties are seen as divided across borders. Nationalistic vilification of this group as "citizens of nowhere" with "cosmopolitan bias" can provoke serious concerns. Given their ability to see challenges as opportunities and their 'can do' attitude, many are embarking on projects that allow them to have a global impact or that bring important dialogue about globalisation to places they call home.

Turning the kaleidoscope: Creating a meaningful life is an ongoing process. With every major turn of their kaleidoscope, Global Cosmopolitans have to integrate the sources of meaning into their decision-making, knowing that the changes in the global context as well as in their personal and professional lives are shifting, too. They know that the goals they create at one stage might be less relevant at another point in time. Aware that there is no clear pathway to a meaningful life, focusing on the dimensions of life above can help clarify what is important, particularly when people are contemplating creating yet another life chapter.

In a series of blog posts to be published in the months ahead, I will be delving deeper into each of the sources that help create a meaningful life.

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