

In This Life

Spiritual Growth and Aging

Leo Missinne, PhD



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Preface

This book offers no ready-made recipes or advice about staying in good health and in good physical shape in spite of age like the commercials promise. On the contrary, these pages invite readers to take old age fully; to discover the value of the third phase of life; to give, in short, a more profound meaning to earthly existence until its very last moments.

Growing in age is a path of progress (in the strong sense of the word) that allows many positive aspects often neglected in present society despite inevitable physical and psychological problems. The attitude that one can have vis-à-vis the process of growing old will depend, then, directly on the manner of envisioning life, suffering, and death, and on the meaning one gives them. Seen in this light, old age is not a problem but a possibility.

This book is only a beginning; the reader has to complete and finish it. My sources of information are my conversations with God, friends, colleagues, and older people. I am most grateful to all of my gerontology students at the University of Nebraska and the University of Southern California. They have been a source of inspiration. My contacts with so many wise older people opened a door for looking toward older age as a time of wisdom and grace.

The ideas, lectures and readings of Viktor E. Frankl's books have inspired my ideas in this book.

Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.

Viktor E. Frankl, *The Doctor of the Soul*, New York: Bantam Books, 1985.

Viktor E. Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*, New York: Touchstone, 1985.



In Search of the Meaning of Life

Does life still have meaning for someone who reaches advanced age? That question is not easy to answer. A double reflection is required, as much about life itself as about old age. Life is one of the most mysterious realities. When we add the complicated givens of extreme old age to the search for the meaning of life, we are confronted with a problem of rare complexity.

No science will ever be able to unveil the deep meaning of old age. Aging is only an incomplete aspect of the reality we call life. Life belongs to the order of mystery, not to the field of problems. We can analyze and explain problems by a system of considerations about motives and purposes, means and consequences.

But only a thoughtful attitude permits access to mysteries, and they never give up the totality of their secrets. Mysteries are part of God's gifts to humankind. That is why respect is the only appropriate attitude in confronting a mystery; in wishing to elucidate the mystery scientifically, we end up killing it.

Explain or contemplate?

Let's suppose that a being from another world lands on Earth. Scientists could analyze it, dissect it, and thereby gather innumerable data, which would be greatly appreciated in the scientific world. But would they have explained this extraterrestrial? No, for to be able to examine and analyze it in that manner, it would have to be put to death. Of course, we would have understood its composition and its functioning, but we would have killed it!

Too much science and too many techniques are mortally dangerous for what is really important: living and communicating with others. That is why I prefer to approach our

subject from the angle of an interior reflection, without attempting to dismantle the works of an entire mechanism. The most fundamental question concerning old age—the question of meaning—is not in the purview of science. It is a philosophical question that has, moreover, numerous implications in the very real lives of today's men and women.

Old age is a period of life in which we can cast a retrospective look on an entire life. Things take their place in a wider frame. This look back, it is true, will never be able to include the whole of existence. But at the moment we glimpse the end of the road and when our task is nearly achieved, we feel a real need to understand the meaning of all we have lived. Then questions loom: *Why have I lived? Why do I still live, fragile, sick, or handicapped as I am? What good is it to live like this? Why should I continue to live in a society that, as a matter of fact, has already excluded me?*

These thoughts are familiar to a great many elderly persons, as well as to those who care for them. These questions must not be rejected. By suggesting several answers, we will

probably be able to help people live their situation in a more dignified and humane manner.

One question, several answers

The answers to the question of the meaning of life are extremely varied and often contradictory. The wise Buddha taught that we must immerse ourselves in the river of life and leave the question of meaning to resolve itself. Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre asserts that human life arises by neither design nor significance, that it continues out of weakness, and is snuffed out by chance. (According to Sartre, birth and death are equally deprived of significance.)

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy confesses to having been tormented all his life by this quest for meaning: “The question, which in my fiftieth year had brought me to the notion of suicide, was the simplest of all questions, lying in the soul of every man from the undeveloped child to wisest sage: ‘What will come from what I am doing now, and may do to-

morrow? What will come from my whole life?' otherwise expressed, 'Why should I live? Why should I wish for anything? Why should I do anything?' Again, in other words: 'Is there any meaning in my life which will not be destroyed by the inevitable death awaiting me?'"

And further on he writes again: "Five years ago a strange state of mind began to grow upon me: I had moments of perplexity, of a stoppage, as it were, of life, as if I did not know how I was to live, what I was to do....These stoppages of life always presented themselves to me with the same question: Why? and what for?...These questions demanded an answer with greater and greater persistence and like dots, grouped themselves into one black spot."

French author and philosopher Albert Camus believed all people are looking for a "why" they never find and are doomed to live in absurdity. He was convinced that many people die because life for them was not worth living. From this he concluded that the question of life's meaning is the most urgent of all, even if it is never to be resolved.

Finding life's meaning is good for your health

Many psychologists agree that a lack of meaning in life, or meaninglessness, is often the origin of neurotic or psychotic behavior. Carl Jung felt that the clinical syndrome of meaninglessness was a very common phenomenon in his practice as a psychiatrist. He wrote: "Absence of meaning in life plays a crucial role in the etiology of neurosis." Every neurosis must be understood, ultimately, as the suffering of a soul that has not discovered its meaning. Thus he said that most of his patients were not suffering from any clinically definable neurosis, but only from the "senselessness and aimlessness of their lives."

Psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl stated that most of his patients suffered from an existential neurosis, which had meaninglessness at its root. Many contemporary psychologists are of the same opinion: the lack of purpose in life is what is found most often at the base of deviant or abnormal conduct.

But we do not need to be famous psychologists to see the deadly role of meaninglessness. Meaninglessness is manifested in the disease of our time—boredom. People today find everything boring: their studies, their profession, their marriage, their friends, even their vacations! For this reason, many (the youngest ages especially) seek compensation in fast-paced activities, alcohol, or drugs to feel they are living. Such behavior helps them feel they have a purpose in life for at least a few hours or days, until the artificial excitement disappears and they find themselves back in the pit. Others dress in extravagant clothes or dye their hair or buy fancy possessions to have that sense of meaning.

We cannot escape it. Everyone, at least at certain times, seeks a valid and fulfilling meaning for life. It is the painful privilege of being human, for we are the only living beings who can reflect. Such questions are peculiar to us, whether young or old. These questionings can sometimes assume tragic proportions, such as when one is ill, when one suffers the loss of a relative or friend, or when one feels the end of life is near.