

The Meaning of Meaning

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Abstract

Meaning is more important than life itself, as people may sacrifice their lives if they find that meaningful. Trauma tears through established meanings. To make life worth living post-trauma, meaning of life must be restored. It is important to understand the nature of meaning if we are to help to restore it. This chapter examines the sources of meaning, provides a classification of meanings, and examines how meanings are disrupted and how they may be restored.

Meaning is central to human motivation. People sacrifice their lives for causes that they find meaningful and they may kill themselves if they feel that their lives have become meaningless. Trauma, such as occurs in disasters, has long been known to disrupt core human meanings (Wolfenstein, 1977; Raphael, 1986; Valent, 1983; 1998; 2004). Recovery requires re-establishment of life's meaning. To re-establish life's meanings we need to understand the meaning of meanings.

Introduction

Meaning of life has been a nebulous philosophical concept, often confused with spirituality and religion. Disasters rip through previously held assumptions of the meanings of life. To counter their senselessness, supernatural meanings have been ascribed to disasters. The most common one has been that the disaster was God's punishment for sin. Realignment with God's will could then retrieve hope and meaning for the afflicted. Another meaning-making myth has been a Job-like testing of human faith in God. Utter senselessness may be countered by simply insisting that one cannot know God's purpose.

Wrapping temporal meaninglessness within a supposed divine universal meaning can provide comfort and spiritual satisfaction. However, it can supplant scientific endeavour to explain the meaning of meaning and help restore it in survivors who feel that they have lost the meaning and purpose of life.

In what follows, I will first examine the semantics of meaning. Next, I will postulate survival and fulfilment levels of meanings. Then I will suggest that the wide variety of positive and negative meanings make sense and can be classified as results of successful and unsuccessful survival strategies that were used at the time of the disaster. Lastly, I will discuss implications of this classification of meanings.

The Semantics of Meaning

Meaning of a word refers to its essence and its ramifications. The meaning we refer to here is the psychological perception of the essence of life and its ramifications. On one level, *life force*, the unstoppable desire to survive, is the essence of life. But

humans need reasons to keep surviving. They need fulfilling meanings to do so. Otherwise death may be more meaningful than life.

The see-saw between the meaningfulness of life or death involves many areas. They include personal goals, relationships, love, usefulness, dignity, nobility, the sacred, ideals, and the universal. *Spirituality* increases as we proceed along this trajectory. It includes religion which is often thought to be the only source of spirituality. The point is that each of these areas, from temporal to spiritual, can include life or death as meaningful. For instance, from fire fighters to suicide bombers, risking or forsaking life can be more meaningful than preserving safety.

What is lacking is a definition of the purpose of life, a definition that includes meaningfulness of life, and sometimes of death.

Purpose of life in evolutionary terms is the survival of the maximum number of genes in a genetic or breeding population. In human terms, I define the purpose of life as survival in order to fulfil the maximum of one's potentials according to the life cycle, and to help others to survive and to fulfil their potentials similarly.

Life has meaning if it fulfils such purpose, or if there is hope to fulfil at least part of such purpose. If life cannot do so but death can, death may be chosen as a meaningful alternative. Death may also be chosen if there is no hope of purpose, because life is then meaningless.

Meaning then has two platforms: survival and fulfilment. Yet it is a circular journey, for human purpose requires survival in order to be fulfilled, and fulfilment to create or nurture more life which needs to survive. Values, ideals, and spirituality are stations along the cyclical journey between survival and fulfilment, and helping new or other life surviving and fulfilling itself. Meaning derives from riding on that cycle.

Survival and Fulfilment Meanings

Survival meanings form almost immediately after the disaster and are compounds of traumatic experiences, responses to them and judgements of those responses.

A rescuer who has just saved a person may feel relief and joy and a sense of worth. The two may be compounded into the meaning "I am a good rescuer." If rescue failed, an alternative meaning may evolve: "I have caused a death."

Fulfilment (existential) meanings may evolve only after a latent period.

A survivor said, "I feel that I have been saved in order to tell the world how to avoid such catastrophes." Another said, "The Holocaust convinced me that men are evil and that there is no God."

Meanings According to Survival Strategies

Survival strategies are evolutionary templates that we share with animals which help us to survive as a species in traumatic circumstances. I have detailed eight survival strategies that make up an octave of potential means of survival (Valent, 1998; 1999; 2004, 2008). Survival strategies send reverberations from the most basic to the most evolved parts of the brain, following the pathways toward fulfilment. Those pathways include survival and fulfilment meanings.

Survival and fulfilment meanings are negative or positive according to whether survival strategies have been successful or not. Successful survival strategies can radiate the greatest joys of fulfilment and meaning. Responses that belong to survival strategies that failed to prevent trauma can radiate into the greatest human sorrows and meaninglessness.

The eight survival strategies that can fuel positive and negative meanings are: rescue/caretaking, attachment, goal achievement, goal surrender/adaptation, fight, flight, competition, and cooperation.

Rescue/Caretaking

Rescue and caretaking comprise instinctive responses by which one capable individual saves the life of another who is threatened and vulnerable.

Survival meaning.

Positive. Altruism, kindness, pity, patience and charity are admirable virtues. Their use in the saving of another's life means that the rescuer is a good, selfless, worthwhile person.

Negative. Lack of desire to help the needy can mean that the person is selfish. However, such meaning, survivor guilt, and belief that one caused the death, can occur even when circumstances prevented effective rescue.

Fulfilment meaning.

Positive. Preserving life, and offering dignity to the weak feels existentially meaningful and serves the purpose of life by the above definition. Survivors especially, or those whose own lives' fulfilment has been curtailed, may yet find purpose in saving and nurturing others. Such nurture may become a lifelong mission.

Rescue of humanity is a common ideological and religious theme. Both provide a sense of universality and sacredness to one giving the gift of life.

Negative. Failure to save life leads to the meaning that one has betrayed the primal purpose of life, of preserving life. Survivor guilt may rack one eternally. Failure to save one's child is a special torture. One does not deserve to be in this world when the other has died.

Understanding. We need to acknowledge the narrow and often fortuitous balance between capacity and inability to save, between altruism and self-preservation, between generosity and being burdened. Humans can only do so much for others.

Attachment

Attachment is an instinctive mammalian bond whereby a vulnerable individual attaches to a protective and caring rescuer/caretaker. Attachment is the reciprocal drive to rescuing/caretaking.

Survival meaning.

Positive. Being held securely by a powerful rescuer and extraordinary carer means not only that one is safe, but also that one is important, worthwhile, lovable, and worth risking for.

Negative. Feeling abandoned and alone means insecurity and that one is not worth saving and caring for; that one is an outcast.

Fulfilment meaning.

Positive. The sense of worth matures into positive self-esteem and positive attachment into a belief that help will come when it is needed. Having been saved intensifies the bond to the rescuer. It may be seen as a sacred gift of life from another, a flame carried from another's heart to one's own.

When saviours are absent they may be remembered, imagined, or manufactured. On an individual scale, amulets, prayers and magic may be used to avert catastrophe. For a disaster afflicted community, sin may explain the disaster, leaving a benevolent saviour still possible. Virtuous deeds, rituals and sacrifices redeem hope and meaning through the belief that they will realign the offended rescuer to one's needs. Otherwise the very fact of survival may be interpreted to mean that God intervened for one's sake.

Negative. Belief that one was abandoned because one was worthless and unlovable radiates into low self-esteem and mistrust that the world will help. Loneliness and alienation are interpreted to mean that the world means to cast one out without reprieve. There is no justice, and no God who will help. Without love or care life has no meaning or purpose.

Understanding. We need to understand the difference between fulfilled attachment with its visions of paradise, and traumatic disruption of bonds with its visions of purposeless insignificance.

Goal achievement

In this survival strategy one has to achieve oneself what in attachment was achieved by others on one's behalf.

Survival meaning

Positive. Capacity for independent survival means control, potency and success in the face of the challenges of the world. Self-confidence and morale are high. "If I want to, I can do it." "I am strong, and I succeed." "Survival is in my hands."

Negative. Inability to meet challenges leads to feelings of impotence, powerlessness, and lack of control. They mean that one is incapable and inadequate. Self-confidence and morale are low. "I am a failure." "I cannot rely on myself to survive."

Fulfilment meaning.

Positive. In attachment one received the necessities of life. In goal achievement one achieves these necessities. The first necessity is food. To eat one kills life. Tribal societies recognized themselves as part of a sacred chain of life. Eating can feel sacred to this day as manifested by the abundance of social and idiosyncratic rituals around food.

Hunting and gathering has been replaced by money and wealth. Money can buy food, shelter, and territory. Money has replaced meanings of being a good hunter. Wealth means success.

Survival skills such as being an expert shooter, sailor, fire fighter, and so on, radiate into various fields of excellence and fulfilment of potentials including sport and art.

Skills of attracting the other sex, sexual prowess and achievement of progeny fulfil important survival goals too.

In all, achievement and command of wealth, shelter, territory, sexuality, progeny, and actualization of one's capacities, mean success as a human being.

Magic, rituals, myths and religion are ubiquitously utilised to ensure good hunts and harvests, to overcome adversities, and to make up for deficiencies in abilities to achieve goals. They are also used as means of reconciling the taking of life.

Negative. Impotence, lack of control and failure negate ideals of achievement and self-sufficiency. A sense of failure overshadows all effort. Instead of affluence there is poverty, both physical and emotional. Creativity is stifled. Fulfilment is lacking. This means that life is a sham, a stagnant conveyor belt to failure as a human being.

Religion and ideology may offer promise of a different future where essentials are provided and success is assured.

Understanding includes realisation that skills of survival and actualization of potentials carries satisfaction, meaning and joy, and that the energy to achieve them comes from other life. One day we all contribute our own beings to the chain of life. In the meantime, if we do not actualise our potentials, our lives are unsatisfied and demoralised.

Goal surrender and Adaptation

One may have to give up basic goals in order to be able to find new ones. It is like chopping off a limb so that the rest of the body survives. The limb may be another person. The process of adaptation starts in shock and being overwhelmed, and ends after grief and mourning when new life goals emerge.

Survival meaning

Positive. In the face of death and destruction the only meaning of life may be a desperate drive to survive, or to maintain some hope – perhaps reunion with a loved person that gives meaning to survival.

Indeed, grief and mourning may highlight love that provides meaning: “The cost of love is loss.” This loss may be negated when dead person appears in visions, dreams, as a ghost, in séances, or through various signs. Loss may be mitigated by absorbing the lost person psychologically. Anything that keeps the dead person alive in some way may be experienced as meaningful.

Magic, myths and religion also offer comfort through the belief that the dead person is still alive and happy in a better place, a place in which reunion will happen.

Negative. The extent and senselessness of death and destruction negates the purpose of life and leaves one in a meaningless world. The result may be depression and despair. Death may offer the only relief as well as hope of reunion.

Fulfilment meaning

Positive. Lost love mourned and now absorbed may form a platform for new loves. Relationships may be sweeter and deeper, appreciated more as a result of past trauma.

Disasters may evolve meaning if they are used as lessons to save other lives. Examples of movements to achieve this outcome are MADD (mother against drunk driving), and Mothers Against War.

Religion can continue to provide comfort by insinuating God's unknowable designs, and providing heaven as a perpetual antidote to death and trauma. Religion can provide a semblance of justice. "God gives, and God takes." "Life is but a loan that has to be repaid." Cycle of life as a universal principle may provide both religious and secular meaning. Religion provides mourning rituals that can help the process of grief.

Negative. Traumatic losses may destroy any semblance of purpose and meaning. They may be seen as evidence of the absence of a just, compassionate and concerned God. "God is dead."

Understanding acknowledges that death is part of life. With death as a backdrop, we must appreciate whatever life is granted to us. We should apply lessons from catastrophes to prevent future ones. In the meantime we should not interfere with the comforts people draw from their cultures and imaginations.

Fight

Fight is an instinct whose function is to remove danger. Threats, hatred, revenge, and killing are escalating manifestations of this survival strategy.

Survival meaning

Positive. Defence of life, property, territory, and values, and ridding those who threaten them is intensely meaningful for the defenders. "I am a brave warrior who defends the lives of my people."

Enemies are like predators and monsters that have to be killed. "Kill or be killed."

Magic, rituals, myths, are harnessed for support. "Only a bullet with my name on it can harm me." "If it is meant to happen, it will." God will protect me, but if one should die, meaning is found in martyrdom and in heavenly rewards.

Natural disasters may be symbolised as wild animals and monsters. Killing the fire dragon was a spontaneous community ceremony that marked survival in a bushfire. Killing humans is expiated in ceremonies such as sweat lodges.

Negative. Killing for purposes other than survival is murder. Killing innocent people who have been scapegoated, demonised and dehumanised constitutes atrocities and crimes against humanity. Realization that one has killed other than in self-defence shatters the meaning of one's life. Such killing goes totally against the purpose of life. Soldiers may try to blot out such realization through drugs, rage, or expiate their guilt by getting themselves killed.

Fulfilment meaning

Positive. Preservation of one's people and their ability to fulfil their lives continues to be highly meaningful.

One's status may be fulfilling. Warriors enjoy awe and sacred status through their authority to take life while staking their own.

On a wider scale, one may have fulfilled God's mission, especially in holy wars. Or one may have fought for an ideology such as patriotism or class equality, or

democracy. Fascist and Hegelian ideology saw war as an ancestrally connected nation (master race) expanding and fulfilling itself.

Negative. Killing is meaningless when fed by blind paranoia and hatred, leaders' ambition and vanity, or when killing becomes a numbers game (body count) or a banal job (as in concentration camps).

Realisation of the evil one perpetrates may fended off by assuming God-likeness through one's power over life and death. Then killing cannot stop and becomes an addiction.

Needless killing means that one is a monster, a wild animal, an outcast from humanity.

Sometimes veterans retrieve meaning by exposing the horrors of war and by becoming peace activists.

Understanding weighs up the necessities of true defence as against the tendency to exaggerated fear. With the extinction of predators and sufficient resources in the world, fight is always an ultimately unnecessary survival strategy.

Difficulty in empathy for enemies and perpetrators hides facts that attackers fear us like we fear them, that perpetrators were themselves victims of violence, and that atrocity-making situations can make us all violent.

Flight

Flight is the reciprocal survival strategy to fight. Rather than ridding enemies, in flight one removes oneself from them. Fear, anxiety, panic and freezing are emotional associations of this survival strategy.

Survival meaning

Positive. Flight can preserve life in certain circumstances as effectively as fight does in others. It can take much courage, resourcefulness, astuteness and cunning to escape annihilation. To have manoeuvred one's family to safety is intensely meaningful.

Amulets, witchcraft and prayers may be enlisted for effective escape or hiding.

Negative. Inability to escape means that one is trapped, a helpless victim. One may be pounced on, raped, tortured, and annihilated at any moment.

Fulfilment meaning

Positive. Reaching sanctuary means that one and one's family or group are safe. One can continue one's life or start a new one.

Sanctuaries may be geographical, social, political, or ideological, such as joining a group or party for safety. Religion offered temporal safety when churches were sanctuaries in wars. Religion offers spiritual haven in heaven - the ultimate sanctuary.

Negative. Meanings of a dangerous world may persist beyond objective danger. "Be prepared." "Keep your head down. Have your suitcase packed. Don't be conspicuous. Hide. Get out."

One may live in continual fear, which is paranoid and phobic if unjustified. Nightmares relating to past traumas persist. Triggers reminiscent of past dangers trigger panic attacks. These responses are the hallmarks of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Withdrawal and drugs may avoid or dampen these triggers, but survival in a

dangerous world remains the dominant preoccupation. Progression to spirituality and meaning are disrupted. There is no God, only monsters.

Understanding acknowledges human vulnerability. Prudent heedfulness without paranoia may prepare one for changed circumstances, and facilitate flight should it become necessary. PTSD may be treated by separating past and present realities and re-establishing a life narrative that has hope and new meanings.

Competition

In situations of scarce resources hierarchies form and resources are distributed down a pecking order. Hierarchical competition is for dominant status. When hierarchies break down people scramble and struggle for resources without order.

Survival meaning

Positive. The meaning of hierarchies is that everyone has his or her place in the pecking order. Sure, those on top receive first and most, but they have an obligation to distribute enough down the line for all to survive. The meaning of hierarchies is that if you honour and obey your superiors they will look after you. If you in turn look after those below you, the community survives. In disasters police and rescuers have special leadership roles. After disasters new hierarchies form.

Each rung on the hierarchical ladder, like figures on a chess board, carries different meanings of status, privileges and survival.

Governmental hierarchies also help in disasters. Priestly and heavenly hierarchies offer non-material comfort.

Negative. Those in power appropriate excessively for themselves, robbing those below them of their necessities. This injustice means submission or revolution. When hierarchies break down, struggle and scramble ensue. Meaning of such situations is that “The world is a jungle where dog eats dog.”

Fulfilment meaning

Positive. Dominance in hierarchies carries meanings of superiority, privilege and power, as well as responsibility to pass resources down the line. Each level in the pecking order can be fulfilling in its own way, with admixtures of respect for superiors, dignity in one’s own status, and respect from those below. Existentially, “Everyone has a place in the order of things.”

Religion and ideologies may offer succour to those on the lower rungs by the promise of classlessness or all being equal in the eyes of God. In practice ideologies and religions have their own hierarchies. Religion has a hierarchy in its priesthood, and even heaven has its hierarchy.

Negative. Inferior status can mean a precarious subsistence level and even elimination. This is especially so when dominants rob, exploit and oppress. Inferior status carries meanings of defeat, powerlessness, subservience, and negative self-regard.

Leaders may abuse their power and succumb to corruption, greed, venality and vanity. Political and religious leaders may claim to be parts of a divine hierarchy, and use religious power to exact obedience. The meaning of such situations is that “For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.” (Matthew 13:12)

However, excesses may lead to revolutions and social chaos. “The social order is unjust.” That means that “a new world order must be established.”

Understanding acknowledges the value of hierarchies. However, excessive use of power and dominance corrupts and leads to struggle. High status is fortune to be enjoyed but also to be shared, otherwise it turns against oneself.

Cooperation

Opposite to competition, in this survival strategy hierarchies dissolve and people are reciprocally helpful and generous. They create mutual security and new resources.

Survival meaning

Positive. Hierarchical levelling, mutual help, altruism, generosity, reciprocity, and love, evoke a meaning that people are basically good hearted. Later there is nostalgia for the sense of community togetherness as occurs in the “post-disaster euphoria” phase of disasters, or as occurred during the London blitz.

Negative. When trust and goodwill is not reciprocated, but is abused and exploited, one feels cheated and betrayed. That can mean that one’s love is unworthy, or that it is foolish to open one’s heart and to be generous.

Fulfilment meaning

Positive. Belief holds that trust and goodwill can radiate to the community and even the world. Generosity will be rewarded. “Give, and it will be given to you.” (Luke 6:35-38). The world can be changed through love. “Make love, not war.”

Love and being loved can have divine dimensions. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God, and knows God...God is love...he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.” (John 4: 7-8)

Existential meaning of the world holds that union, giving, and love creates a beautiful universe, like it creates a beautiful baby in a loving couple.

Negative. Betrayal, exploitation and abuse of generosity and love lead to hurt and cynicism. In extreme cases one’s heart is broken, soul desecrated and universe fragmented. Trust and love must be resisted because they destroy.

Understanding acknowledge many types of love, each with its generative and creative aspects. However, the cost of love, as well as potential grief, is also potential exploitation. The flame of love requires constant guarding and refuelling.

Discussion

Humans are the only meaning making animals. They make meaning out of their survival and out of their existence. Both help to organise nodes of information about their states of being and help them to achieve their purpose. Meanings can mean more to humans than their very lives, because they inform whether the purpose of life is being served or not.

Some readers may be offended by the idea that what they experience as spiritual and sacred derives from survival needs which radiate from the primitive brain to the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain uniquely developed in humans.

The alternative is to define spirituality as coming from a supernatural force outside oneself. Using that format, helping survivors who see their lives as meaningless requires a priest-like exhortation to faith and to utilisation of specific rituals in which the helper believes.

Recognition of loss of meaning in terms of survival strategies that could not cope with traumatic situations and interfered with the trajectory of a purposeful life, gives us a chance to diagnose the source of the loss of meaning. This can be done by tracing specific losses of meaning back to the situations where corresponding specific survival strategies failed. It is from the points of failure that negative survival and existential meanings derive.

These points of failure can be explored and reframed in terms of specific human limitations at specific traumatic times rather than universal failures of the survivor or of the world. Release from fixed trauma derived meanings can lead to a reassessment of current potentials for meaning and purpose.

In this chapter I did not consider a variety of defences that help people cope with meaninglessness. People may distort information about their meaninglessness through denial, dissociation, repression, displacement and other psychological defences.

They may sublimate their distress into art, sport, or hobbies, using survival strategies in which they can claim success. For instance, survivors may immerse themselves in work or power plays rather than deal with their despair at meaningless loss or their sense of helplessness at being cast out. In other words, humans do not see meaning and meaninglessness in black and white terms. They may cushion and delay full consciousness of what they perceive as their meaningless lives. This gives windows of opportunity for intervention.

Nevertheless, within the dynamics of defences which may distort the flow of streams of meaning, the basic streams that emanate from traumatic situations and survival strategies used in them can still be discerned.

Conclusion

Survival strategies can contribute to recognition, classification, and diagnosis of positive and negative survival and existential meanings. Negative survival and existential meanings can be traced to their origins, made sense of, be reframed according to realistic current circumstances, and be replaced with positive meanings.

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