

Foreword

As a human concern, purpose has been around at least as long as any of the world's great religions or philosophies. Whenever someone asks a deeply searching question such as “why am I here?”, “what’s the reason for my existence?”, “what is my life about?”, or “how can I make the best use of my time on this planet?”, the concept of purpose inevitably arises. Finding purpose in life is a pursuit that links people of all historical epochs, social-cultural backgrounds, economic circumstances, and geographical settings. It is a timeless, universal feature of human experience.

Purpose also is an especially timely pursuit, in our day of dynamic global transformation. Technological change, as many commentators have pointed out, is “disrupting” practically every pattern of commercial and social existence. It seems as though nothing can be taken for granted any longer. Vocations that were once highly stable are disappearing, declining, or morphing into barely recognizable versions of their former selves (consider the present directions of journalism, law, medicine, education). Families are becoming dramatically more varied in their compositions as well as in their formation and duration. People are moving away from home communities with ever more expansive horizons in mind; and, in accord with this expansion, friendships and other intimate relations have gone global and virtual, with cell phone conversations replacing face-to-face encounters, social media replacing cell phone conversations, and who knows what replacing social media in the next technological revolution to come. Amidst all this sweeping alteration in everything that anchors a personal identity, it is little wonder that people are looking around for a compass to guide them through life. Purpose is such a compass *par excellence*—and, predictably, our mass media are full of stories about the value of purpose for success, health, and happiness in these often-perplexing times.

Despite the timeless and timely status of purpose as a core element of human experience, the scientific study of purpose has been surprisingly thin until very recently. This is not unusual in the human sciences, which tend to focus on narrower constructs that may be examined under controlled conditions in laboratory settings. Purpose is a sweeping, far-horizons type of goal that comes into play over extended periods of time in the crucible of major life decisions. To study it in a serious way requires exactly the kinds of methodological treatments prominent in the present book: deep, probing interviews; case studies of exemplary persons; and

considerations of actual contexts that elicit purpose. Only a mature science can tackle a complex subject such as purpose with a range of methods suited to its complexity. The appearance of *Purpose in Life: A Critical Component of Optimal Youth Development* is a welcome sign that the psychological science of human development has reached this level of maturity.

Beyond its importance to psychological science, this book addresses a timely educational concern. The most pressing problem in education today is a shortfall in student motivation. This shortfall is not confined to disadvantaged neighborhoods or poorly-run classrooms (although it leads to especially damaging outcomes in such settings). Even in the best schools there are many students who find little meaning in their studies. Some of these students may grind out their work dutifully but without interest, getting by with whatever minimum grades the need to keep out of trouble; others shirk their academic assignments entirely. When young people spend countless hours, days, and weeks on activities that they find meaningless, there are psychological costs. I documented some of these costs in *The Path to Purpose*: they may include boredom and apathy, a debilitating anxiety, or an ensnarement in the lures of hedonism and cynicism. Unmotivated students are often the ones who are most “stressed out” in school, even though they are not often those who are working the hardest. The students who have found purpose in their schoolwork, in contrast, usually gain so much satisfaction from their efforts that long hours fly by without much anxiety. Working hard is not the problem; rather, the problem is working without knowing why, working without a clear purpose. For a young person, purpose is critical to enduring academic motivation.

The importance of purpose continues throughout life, and as people transition from one age to the next, they are often called upon to redefine themselves and their broadest goals. Doing so successfully is essential for health, happiness, and meaning. For this reason, people of all ages have much to learn from the scientific study of purpose. *Purpose in Life: A Critical Component of Optimal Youth Development* offers valuable information to scientists, educators, and people interested in the essentials of human development. Its author, Kendall Cotton Bronk, was a key player in our own early forays into the study of youth purpose at Stanford University. Now, with this book, she has shed bright new light on this key topic, a significant contribution to scholarship and practice alike.

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Purpose in Life

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