



## NOBLE PURPOSE

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The Joy of Living a Meaningful Life



WILLIAM DAMON

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*To Bob and Dottie King and family:  
Thriving with purpose!*





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## INTRODUCTION

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**T**o be what is called happy,” wrote the nineteenth-century Polish poet Cyprian Norwid, “one should have (a) something to live on, (2) something to live for, (3) something to die for. The lack of one of these results in drama. The lack of two results in tragedy.”

This slim volume, authored by renowned Stanford University psychologist William Damon, testifies to the wisdom of those words. In addition to our human needs of sustaining and reproducing our bodies, we humans flourish when also meeting two higher-level needs that today’s psychological science is more and more appreciative of: our need to belong, and our need for significance, for meaning, for noble purpose.

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Recent American Psychological Association president Martin Seligman observed that a loss of meaning has accentuated the recent epidemic of depression. Finding meaning, he has noted, requires “an attachment to something larger than the lonely self. To the extent that young people now find it hard to take seriously their relationship with God, to care about their relationship with the country, or to be part of a large and abiding family, they will find it very difficult to find meaning in life. To put it another way, the self is a very poor site for finding meaning.”

At the peak of her fame and fortune, with 146 tennis championships behind her and married to John Lloyd, Chris Evert reflected, “We get into a rut. We play tennis, we go to a movie, we watch TV, but I keep saying, ‘John, there has to be more.’” For the full life, we need more than bread alone.

For psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, well-being arises from having one’s life focused on an overriding goal, a unifying



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theme that gives meaning to our lesser goals. For Mother Teresa it was to help the destitute: “Nothing makes you happier than when you really reach out in mercy to someone who is badly hurt,” she reflected. Mother Teresa, like so many other purpose-filled people, may not have lived “the good life” in the optimum material sense, but she lived a good, rich life.

Csikszentmihalyi has studied the “flow” experience enjoyed by purposeful artists, physicians, writers, and athletes. When he and his colleagues beeped trial participants at random intervals, their consistent finding was that those who were vegetating, perhaps as couch potatoes in front of the television, reported little of the satisfaction that accompanies the unself-conscious experience of flow. When interrupted while doing something active and purposeful—whether at leisure or work—they more often were totally immersed, unconscious of time, and delightfully engrossed. “In every part and corner of our life, to lose oneself is to be a gainer,”

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noted Robert Louis Stevenson. “To forget oneself is to be happy.”

One of the most remarkable people I have known was industrialist John Donnelly, whose company manufactured most car mirrors. Shortly before his death at age seventy-four, he remarked, “What will I have achieved in life if all I have done is to make car mirrors—there has to be more to it than that.” So part of his life mission, beyond making safety-enhancing car mirrors, was to create meaningful, involving work experiences. To accomplish this, he pioneered the organization of his employees into self-managed work groups and shared profits with them when times were good. By engaging them in structuring their own work and setting their own goals, he added purpose to their lives, and he made the Donnelly Corporation not only profitable but a place that workers raved about.

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But enough from me. William Damon, who has studied what purpose adds to developing lives, is the gentle and wise expert here. He helps us welcome purpose into our everyday lives and into our calling at work. And he helps us appreciate the psychological roots and spiritual fruits of purpose. Let us learn from him, and from the sages whose voices he has assembled.

—DAVID G. MYERS

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