



be hopeful, be strong, be brave, be curious

HOW **COACHING** CAN HELP YOU
GET OUT OF YOUR OWN WAY
AND **CREATE A MEANINGFUL LIFE**

ruth s. pearce

FOREWORD BY DANA BROWNLEE,
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WILEY

Foreword

It's not enough to have strengths and talents. We all have them, but too often we can't necessarily see them as others do—just as we can't see the nose on our face.

During my early years as a corporate trainer, I'd worked hard to catch the attention of a major international training organization. Having launched my own company after a decade or so of traditional corporate experience, I was more than confident about my abilities facilitating dynamic and engaging sessions, but securing the clients was not just a challenge but downright terrifying at times. That's why the opportunity to partner with a leading international training company was beyond enticing. While I was thrilled to talk to them about coming on board as a contract trainer, I felt a gut punch as the instructor relations representative explained that they were interested in bringing me on not to teach the team building courses I'd grown comfortable executing but instead to teach a project management requirements course—ouch! While I immediately pushed back on that, insisting that "requirements management" wasn't my sweet spot (while internally nursing feelings of inadequacy and terror), she, undeterred, methodically walked me through my own résumé, pointing out my broad range of experience, specifically that of eliciting, documenting, and managing requirements on an array of technical projects over several years. The more we chatted, the more I could see my own expertise, which I hadn't just minimized but completely ignored.

I trusted her assessment, began teaching that course, and absolutely thrived. My students over the years gave me rave reviews in particular because I was able to weave in so many tangible, practical examples from my years of management consulting experience. A few years later, having taught multiple course titles successfully, I was asked by the same training company to author a new Business Analysis course, their flagship course for the new topic area. Again, I was hesitant, uncertain, and resistant, but their representative again talked me through how my corporate experiences were a strong fit for the course content, and, in doing so, they bolstered my confidence around growing into the prominent leadership role of course author. Within months of our conversation, I'd not only authored a newly successful course but also traveled around the United States and beyond teaching inaugural course events that other instructors could audit to prepare them to teach the course as well. I wasn't just the lead instructor but also the leading authority guiding instructors, making content decisions and influencing the direction of the course. I'd grown into a much broader, more influential role, and they'd coached me through that process. While I'd garnered the raw talent years earlier, it was their periodic coaching, which I had no idea I needed, that helped me begin to see the breadth and depth of my talents for the first time.

That shift changed the trajectory of my business, my career, and, ultimately, my sense of self. That type of support and enlightenment is a gift that we all deserve to have as we work to create our most fulfilling and impactful lives. That's why this book is so critically necessary. It's a guidebook to help each of us self-reflect and determine whether coaching can become a pathway to achieving new levels of performance, achievement, and personal contentment.

If you have ever thought about dipping your toe into the "coaching waters," this book is for you. Ironically, those who haven't seriously thought about it might benefit even more. In *Be Hopeful, Be Strong, Be Brave, Be Curious*, coaching guru Ruth Pearce uses a mindful, strengths-focused approach to demystify a concept that's often misunderstood: the world of professional coaching.

The world is full of critics—people to point out your faults and gaffes—but Ruth's brilliance, as a mindfulness practitioner and coacher of coaches, is her passion around helping others identify, celebrate, and leverage their unique strengths. A longtime VIA Character Strengths facilitator, Ruth's top strengths are Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence, Bravery,

Curiosity, Fairness, Gratitude, and Hope, and those are the traits and values that undergird each chapter as she outlines a roadmap for you to take a personal inventory of your own readiness to explore coaching as a resource for enhanced growth and development.

The truth is that when our strengths are ensconced within our blind spots, we're tapping into only a portion of our potential. Tragically, it's the strengths that are most inherent in our personality, the most automatic, that can also be the most unconscious and unrecognized. We more likely just assume everyone is wired that way and miss the uniqueness of our talent.

Unfortunately, unrecognized talent can translate into missed opportunity year after year after year.

If you're wondering whether you're really tapping into your full potential or perhaps missing valuable growth and achievement opportunities, consider these questions that the book helps you explore:

What is coaching anyway?

What myths have you internalized about who gets coaching and why?

Are you a good candidate for professional coaching?

Are you ready to be coached?

Will coaching help you reach your professional goals?

What does the coaching process look like? Feel like?

What outcomes can you expect from regular coaching?

Can you coach yourself? Is that really a thing?

How do you find the right coach for you?

Have you internalized limiting beliefs that have blocked your own progress?

Do you truly understand your own values, interests, and goals?

Do you want to be held accountable. . .really?

Are you ready to grow?

Arguably, these are the types of existential questions that so many busy, highly successful professionals grapple with, consciously or subconsciously, as they contemplate their own growth and development. This book will help guide you through that critically important process of self-reflection and analysis.

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I remember having heard someone say years ago that Tiger Woods spends millions of dollars each year on “golf lessons.” Admittedly, if that’s true, they’re most likely not the type of “lessons” you or I would get, but the statement still initially landed for me as somewhat counterintuitive. But the more I thought about it, the more it made complete sense. When you have a continuous improvement mindset, as all world-class athletes certainly do, coaching becomes more important, not less. I’d argue that the same holds true for the best of the best in any field. What separates them is that they view excellence not as a destination but as a journey—a perpetual one—and they’re always in pursuit.

—Dana Brownlee, President, Professionalism Matters, Inc.

Introduction

I think there is a lot of magic and miracle work in coaching. And the art and science of coaching are much misunderstood and often underestimated.

It is not just the way the coaching process works but the very idea of a coach. We may look as though all we have to do is sit and listen and ask a question now and then. In fact, we are admonished by our training not to do too much of the work. “Leave the work to the client,” our trainers tell us. The truth is that there is plenty of work for the coach. But what does the coach actually *do*?

We keep time—and not just minute by minute so that we can abruptly interrupt your flow with a brash “Our time is up.” We let you know where we are and check in with progress. As much as we can, we bring the session to a “soft landing,” leaving you with things to think about, maybe act upon, but not leaving you hanging.

We listen for themes—insights and topics that come up again and again.

We observe and highlight shifts in energy—excitement, lethargy, enthusiasm, and dismay.

We maintain a safe space for whatever you want to express, which is sometimes a rollercoaster of emotions.

We keep your secrets, always honoring the confidentiality and trust of the relationship.

We remind you of your goals and help you adjust them any time you change your mind.

We focus exclusively on you until it is time to stop.

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We stay connected with your story between sessions and connect the dots throughout the arc of the coaching relationship.

We tailor our approach to take account of the uniqueness of you.

We temper personal curiosity ("Tell me about your job") while using curiosity to expand your awareness ("What do you need me to know about your job for me to be helpful?").

We look at things from your perspective while inviting you to look at things from a different point of view.

And, believe me, it takes more energy to withhold an obvious piece of advice than to share it. But we know that as tempted as you are to ask for the solution, your success will feel sweeter when you come up with your own plan.

We challenge, encourage, and cheer for you, and we celebrate your wins.

And then we reset and do it again for the next client.

I wish I could more effectively communicate the value of coaching and the investment we make to be good coaches. I make the case for coaching to coaches all the time. I have been privileged to train more than 60 coaches in my career!

But, I was surprised to be invited to write this book, because this book isn't for coaches. The intention of this book is to pull back the curtain on the coaching process and to give you, the potential coaching client, an insight into what coaching is about and why you might want some for yourself.

When I first started to write this introduction, I was going to describe you, the audience, as the "potential coaching beneficiary." Apart from that sounding academic (pompous), I realized it is also not a fair representation. As a coach, I learn a tremendous amount *from* my coaching clients. Through my clients I have learned about changing my mindset, changing my habits, identifying what is meaningful in life, making healthy choices, learning to let go—and the list goes on. It is not because I did not know the theory behind these things and more; it is because there is a big gap between the "what I want/need to be and do" and the "how I am going to get myself to do it and be it."

My wonderful coaching clients have shown me not just where the path is but how to walk it while wearing the wrong shoes and having left my compass at home. As a result of my interactions with my clients, I have changed my eating, drinking, exercise, and sleeping habits. I have narrowed my work focus, identified what matters most to me, and put my energy into those parts of my life. I have made tough choices and built greater resilience and stamina. I have seen how my clients have struggled and succeeded—or adapted—and this has inspired and informed



my own journey. For the sake of yourself *and* your future coach, I hope you will embark on the coaching journey. Both of you will benefit!

I hope my clients receive as much from working with me as I receive from working with them. Some of them helped me put language into the journey that is coaching. It is a brave thing to do because it exposes their vulnerability, but it is what this book needs to reach its audience. So, thank you!

Navigating the Book

This book is split into three sections. The first section, Chapters 1–3, focuses on how to identify your meaning and purpose, why you should want to, what it means to be in your own way, and how to get out of it. If your sense of meaning and purpose is clear, you might find this section less relevant. Maybe you have already explored the questions in this section. No problem. Just jump to the second section, which includes concrete suggestions.

The second section, Chapters 4–8, explores the challenges of creating a life of meaning and examines how coaching can help you get out of your own way. The suggestions in this section are more concrete, and you will see a lot of opportunities to measure the progress of your journey.

Then, Chapter 9 brings it all together (coaching, meaning, and action) and explores how you can create the life you want—how *you* can transform.

In conclusion, we will consider the next steps. You will also find some tools in the appendices that will help you decide who you want to be in coaching, how you want to show up, what you want to focus on, which behaviors you want to cultivate and which you want to dial back. What tools you need to build awareness, and to discover new learnings and new ways of being, and how to find *your* coach.

There are five appendices as follows:

Appendix A – Proposed core coaching competencies for coaching clients.

Appendix B – Profile of Tegan – one of our case study clients.

Appendix C – Profile of Jamal – the second of our case study clients.

Appendix D – Suggested questions for selecting your coach

Appendix E – Identifying what is, and is not, a coaching moment.

Throughout this journey, I will be working with Tegan (she/her) and Jamal (he/him). Through their experiences, we will examine what coaching is, how it works, and what the results are. To find out more about Tegan and Jamal, check out their profiles in Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively.



Each chapter concentrates on a theme for coaching. Whether you are a potential coaching client seeking to understand what a coaching process might look like for you or a coach wanting to better explain coaching to a potential client, each of the chapters elaborates on one idea – Hope, Strength and so on. Each of the chapters provides resources for coach and client alike. The book taken together is a possible pathway to growth and learning through coaching.

Chapter 1—Finding Meaning and Purpose: Inspiration

When we inspire, we draw people into our journey—or theirs. We connect them to their path, which is what this book is meant to do. Chapter 1 is intended to inspire you to find your *why* and use the tools in the book, and possibly a coach, to help you grab that *why* and make it your North Star.

Chapter 2—In Your Own Way: Normalization

One of the most common symptoms that shows up in the coaching “room” is imposter syndrome. Most of us suffer from it—that feeling that at any moment someone will notice that we are not who they thought we were, that we don’t know what they thought we knew, or that we cannot do what they thought we could do. And many of us feel like we are the only person in the world going through it. Obviously, everyone *else* is feeling good, right? Chapter discusses the difference between normal, commonplace, and habitual actions/thoughts. I’ll explore ways you might be creating obstacles that keep you from being who you want to be and what you can do to stop.

Chapter 3—Getting Out of Your Own Way: Improvisation

Although Chapter 3 explores some Holy Grails of coaching (things coaches hold dear), there really are very few rules. Thank goodness coaching is a forgiving art and science. Coaches improvise and use their intuition, experience, and training. Every client is different, and every day is different. Sometimes that improvisation proves fruitful and provides the client with an aha moment, whereas other times the client shakes their head or looks perplexed. But if we have a good coach-client relationship, good standards, and good intentions, that’s okay.

I improvise a lot in this book. Some things will land well, and others will make you perplexed. Either way, feel free to write to me if you want to follow up.





Chapter 4—Appreciating the Coaching Journey: Co-creation

To get the most out of coaching, the client and the coach need to be ready to co-create the journey together. The coaching client gets to determine what is important, what goes into the agenda, and where the attention is focused. And the coach, if the relationship is going to be fruitful, keeps that agenda in mind, builds the framework, and walks alongside the client as together they draw the client's roadmap.

In this book, we will journey together. I will offer questions and examples, and I hope that you will come to appreciate, in all senses of the word, the journey.

Chapter 5—Being Hopeful: Expectation

To make progress, we need hope. Chapter 5 explores what hope is—and isn't. We will examine some common misconceptions about hope and shatter some illusions about it. More than wishing, we will make it so!

Chapter 6—Being Strong: Motivation

Many clients come with blind spots. They don't really know what makes them special. They don't know what drives them. And they don't always recognize that their special qualities *are* special. Chapter 6 measures different types of strengths and explores how you can be motivated to *act* on those strengths.

I am motivated to act by you and by the hope that you will make discoveries as you read this book—about yourself, about what is available to you, and about what meaningful contribution you are motivated to make.

Chapter 7—Being Brave: Conversation

One of the coaches who advised me in the writing of this book said, "Remember to explain that the best coaching is compassionate *and* tough." And it is true: You will not make changes, discover new things, or make difficult decisions if your coach keeps you squarely in your comfort zone. The ways of thinking you have used before will result in the same outcomes. So, clients have to display a certain amount of bravery in the coaching conversations. Bravery shows up as an openness and willingness to change perspective, but it does not mean a lack of fear or a feeling of comfort. Bravery is feeling uncomfortable and doing





it anyway. Chapter 7 explores why bravery—by both the client *and* the coach—matters in a successful coaching relationship.

Chapter 8—Being Curious: Exploration

At the heart of great discovery is exploration. If we only see the same things we have seen before, think the same things we have thought before, feel the same things we have felt before, and do the same things we have done before, then we will get the results we got before. By being curious about what else is possible, we open possibilities. One of a coach's best tools is targeted curiosity—not curiosity for the coach's sake but on behalf of the client.

Curiosity happens to be one of my strengths—sometimes to my detriment—so I hope you will see throughout this exploration a healthy curiosity about you, about coaching, and about how to find meaning.

Chapter 9—Creating Your Meaningful Life: Transformation

Once you know what you want and what is standing in your way, and once you have explored and discussed your options with your coach, found inspiration, improvised, identified your motivation, and recognized how you act in similar ways to other people and how you are different, then it is time to create your new pathway. As you do so, you transform from who you were to who you want to be.

Conclusion—Choosing Your Next Act: Intention

To finish, we will bring all the pieces together and work on setting an intention. In true project management fashion, we will set an immediate intention, a habit-forming intention, a habit-building intention, an intermediate intention, a moderate-term intention, and a long-term intention. You determine the time frames, milestones, measures of success, and inflection points (when intentions will be reviewed and adjusted). Your journey will start!

Let's begin!



CHAPTER

1

Finding Meaning & Purpose: *Inspiration*

I have learned over the years that when one's mind is made up, this diminishes fear; knowing what must be done does away with fear.

— **Rosa Parks, Civil Rights Activist**

The Meaning of Meaning

One of my book advisors admonished me for the way I originally wrote this first chapter. “Don’t assume that we are all searching for meaning,” she said. “I and others like me already have a strong sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging. We are not all lost in the wilderness!”

There is much evidence that a sense of meaning is a precondition for a long, fulfilling, and happy life. Some of us already have a strong sense of meaning and belonging. We know that people who belong to

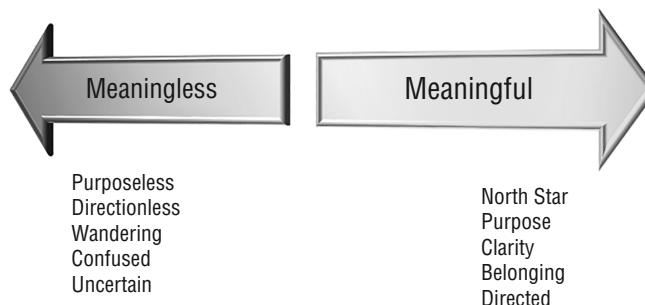
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communities, churches, spiritual groups, and other groups with shared interests and beliefs report living better and longer.^{1,2}

So maybe you already have that deep sense of meaning. For the rest of us, it may well be an ongoing search. I know it has been for me, although every day I feel a little closer to clarifying what it is in life that gives me meaning.

How often do you check in on your sense of meaning? One way to measure it is to use an assessment such as the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ).³

Another option is to use a spectrum like this one and see where you feel you live on that spectrum. If you have a strong sense of meaning, you may want to skip this chapter and go straight to Section 2. Have more questions than answers about meaning? This chapter is for you!



Case Study: Tegan

Tegan (she/her) is a middle manager in an information technology company about 5–8 years away from retirement. Before becoming a manager, Tegan was an individual contributor, widely regarded as the go-to person in one of the organization's primary product lines.

Tegan has been offered coaching through work. She has received multiple reassurances that this is not a reflection on her performance. The company is experimenting to see what benefits derive from offering coaching.

¹ See, for example, WebMD. (n.d.). Spirituality may help people live longer. www.webmd.com/balance/features/spirituality-may-help-people-live-longer

² See, for example, Alimujiang, A., Wiensch, A., Boss, J., et al. Association Between Life Purpose and Mortality Among US Adults Older Than 50 Years. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2019;2(5):e194270. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.4270

³ https://fetzer.org/sites/default/files/images/stories/pdf/selfmeasures/PURPOSE_MEANING-MeaninginLife.pdf

It has been difficult to hire and retain people, and someone in HR suggested that an organization-wide coaching program could be beneficial to increase retention.

Tegan has explained that each step in her career has been the result of a manager tapping her on the shoulder and saying, “You should do this next.” Tegan’s family has big dreams that one day Tegan will run a department, maybe even a company. Tegan enjoyed being the subject matter expert previously but since becoming a manager has felt rather jaded and disconnected from work and the people she works with. That feeling of lack of direction has spread into other parts of Tegan’s life, so this coaching presents an opportunity to take stock and reevaluate her choices. Tegan has even been wondering if it is time to change companies.

Tegan has had one meeting with her new coach and established that the coach feels like a good fit. Tegan has been reading about people who feel engaged at work and something called *job crafting*, and she is curious to explore further.⁴

Together, Tegan and the coach come up with an overarching agenda for coaching: “finding my why/looking for inspiration.” The coach asks why that is important, and Tegan reflects for a moment and says, “Because I will give more and get more out of life if it feels meaningful, and that will make it easier to navigate tough times.”⁵

After a few more moments of thought, Tegan adds, “I don’t want just to *look* for inspiration and meaning; I want to *find* them!”

The coach asks what successful coaching will look like. Tegan thinks for a moment and says, “I will have a plan for what is next that will create a life that feels satisfying and worthwhile. I will be motivated to get up in the morning and feel that what I do each day—or at least some part of it—is worthwhile. And instead of dreaming about retirement and looking for ways to accelerate it, I will relish the days I have left at work.”

The coach makes a note not just of what Tegan says but the energy with which Tegan expresses it (and a reminder to explore options for early retirement if the topic comes up again).

Finding Inspiration

Inspiration is a great word. We often talk about it in coaching in terms of what drives us to make a change or to keep doing what we are committed to—what gives what we do and who we are meaning.

⁴ For an overview of what job crafting is, see Dutton, Jane & Wrzesniewski, A, What job crafting looks like. Harvard Business Review. 2020. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/what-job-crafting-looks-like>

⁵ Tegan’s profile is available in Appendix B.



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Simon Sinek, an author and motivational speaker, says, “Very few people or companies can clearly articulate *why* they do *what* they do. By *why*, I mean your purpose, cause, or belief. *Why* does your company exist? *Why* do you get out of bed every morning? And *why* should anyone care?”⁶

I also like the other meaning: to draw in. We usually use it to mean drawing in a breath, but in coaching I like to think of it more broadly. It is the process of being drawn into the journey, the inquiry, the exploration, and the implementation of what is possible.

Simon goes onto say, “People don’t buy *what* you do; they buy *why* you do it. We are drawn to leaders and organizations that are good at communicating what they believe. Their ability to make us feel like we belong—to make us feel special, safe, and not alone—is part of what gives them the ability to inspire us.”⁷

What draws you in?

If there is one thing I have learned in my years of coaching and, before that, managing people, is that just about all of us want to believe that there is some reason to do the things we do, learn the things we learn, struggle, and stretch. We want to feel inspired to act; we want to be drawn in, not pushed, compelled, or obligated. Tegan is not alone in that.

As a manager, I found that my team accomplished more, felt better, and were more motivated when we were connected to each other and to the purpose of the project. They felt their work was valuable. They sought meaning, and meaning came through connection, purpose, and a feeling that it matters. They were drawn into a common endeavor and felt that they each had a part to play.

In coaching, clients show up at the door for many reasons, but at the heart of most of their visits is the question “what is my point?” We can rephrase this as “what draws me in?”

The actual questions they arrive with are varied. Their questions might be soul-searching:

Who do I want beside me in my life?

What next?

What is life balance for me?

How do I feel fulfilled?

⁶ Sinek, S. (n.d.). *How great leaders inspire action*. TED Talk. www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action/c

⁷ Ibid

How can I make better choices?

How do I make others listen?

What is my story?

How do I build confidence?

What is my legacy?

Am I cut out for this?

Or their questions might be practical:

Where should I work?

Should I downsize my house?

How do I get fit? Lose weight?

How do I make a new habit stick?

How do I . . . ?

What are your biggest life questions?

What Is Meaning?

I asked my book advisors to help define meaning. And it turned out to be quite difficult to pin down. Here are some of the answers:

“Meaning is behind the things that give us purpose. And when we align to our purpose, we find motivation and satisfaction.”

—Julianne Wolfe

“[Meaning is] . . . a question of both gut instinct and machination. For me, ‘meaning’ is having depth and force. It need not be long-term, because this isn’t a helpful measure, and life can be transient—and that’s okay. I know something is ‘meaningful’ to me if it resonates and sits comfortably. It is not about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in any objective sense. I think ‘meaning’ is, therefore, on balance, a very personal thing.”

—Sarah Schütte, Solicitor-Advocate

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"Meaning to me is about the purpose and your desire to achieve it. Meaning explains why you want to meet and exceed goals."

—Diane M.

"Meaning answers the question 'why am I here?' I would add that meaning helps us to find a way to feel that there is purpose in our life, work, relationships."

—Jana Wardian, making meaning by being Nana and researching to reduce the work of being a patient

So, What is Meaning?

Michael Steger is one of the foremost researchers in the field of "meaning."⁸

He has described meaning in life as follows:

coherence + purpose + significance

Coherence is our understanding—what we think about who we are and what we do. It is the way that we create connections between one experience and another, between one person and another.

Purpose is why we do it, where we are going, our ultimate goal(s).

Significance is a sense that our beliefs, goals, and actions matter.⁹

When we understand where we are going and why, and when we are clear about what we are pursuing and feel that it is important and valuable, we have meaning. We are inspired!

Why Does Having a Sense of Meaning Matter?

There are probably many people in the world, often people with reasonable resources, who cannot identify what gives them meaning. They do the things they do because those things are the next steps on a path

⁸ For example: Martela, F. & Steger, M. (2016). The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. 11. 1–15. 10.1080/17439760.2015.1137623

⁹ Frank Martela & Michael F. Steger (2016) The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. 11:5, 531–545, DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2015.1137623



defined by someone else; they bend to the opinions of others; and they barely pause to reflect on what matters to them. And there are people with few resources who have a great sense of meaning. Then there are those of us who are lucky enough to have both resources *and* a sense of meaning. Which do you want to be?

When we have a sense of meaning, the next steps seem inevitable. Despite fears, we are drawn forward. Despite setbacks, we keep going. With a sense of meaning, we tend to become more hopeful, more adaptable, more curious, and braver. We can go beyond the boundaries of what we previously thought we were capable of.

There are many descriptors for meaning: our North Star, our guiding light. Whatever you name it, the concept is the same: It is the reference point we always come back to. Regardless of how far we wander, the fundamental meaning of our life brings us back on track. Unless we don't have a sense of meaning.

What then? Does life end? Not always, but it can become a bit of a drag. We can feel as though we are wandering aimlessly, not really knowing how or what to choose. Or maybe we accept someone else's idea of what is meaningful. We may seek short-term thrills to up the excitement. In the end, however, without our own sense of a North Star, most of us feel pointless, unfulfilled, and empty.

Meaning Is Personal and Not Always Constant

Over time, our sense of meaning may change and evolve. Some things that drove me as a child no longer provide motivation. I would do my homework so I could go out and ride my bike. Now I do my homework so that I can connect more people to their purpose. I can draw more people into their lives. Other childhood drives, such as learning and applying new things, still provide the same sense of forward motion and satisfaction.

I am not talking about a biological imperative here—to reproduce, to survive. I am talking about a sense of something that we can focus on, feel, and return to. It is understanding what makes it worth being here, feeling that being here is contributing something, and that what we are contributing matters. It is the sense that we matter and what we choose to do matters too. Maybe it is even the sense of “if I don’t do it, who will?”

Meaning is personal and cannot be imposed by someone else. However much a parent or teacher may want us to want to be a brain surgeon, they cannot *make* it so, regardless of much they may try. And they cannot make us passionate about the idea.



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Indeed, many of the people I coach are working to identify the gap between who they are, who they want to be, and who others want them to be. All too often they have felt pressured to follow a path laid out by someone else. They come to coaching looking for ways to identify and be driven by their own personal sense of meaning.

Some clients are seeking a complete sense of meaning.

Others know what makes sense to them but question whether it is significant enough. Or they are driven to go after something but cannot explain why. Or they do things that seem to give value to others but cannot see what the end goal is.

When they have all three components of meaning (coherence + purpose + significance), they know who to be, what to do, and where to go next, even if it is difficult.

What makes sense to you?

What Are Some Ways to Find My Meaning?

Discovering your own sense of meaning generally requires reflecting on a lot of questions. We will use some of them in this book, and maybe along the way you will have some aha moments, some insights—or maybe you will decide you want a coach! If you need help discovering your life purpose, don't worry. While some of us already have a strong sense of meaning, most of us struggle to put a finger on what it is that matters most to us.

When I changed my career a few years ago, I *found* more meaning. Rather than deciding what gives me meaning and going after it, I ran away from a role that was taking away all sense of meaning. Initially, I had found meaning in being a project manager, as project managers are part of the reason that projects come to fruition, and that felt meaningful. But we don't always get to work on the life-changing projects. Many are mundane. They may be important to someone, but they may not have broad importance.

Project managers contribute in many ways, but in my last project as a program manager, I discovered my passion: people. It was not clear to me at first. I just observed the times when my energy was high—and when it was not—and I noticed a correlation between people and energy. Any time I interacted with others, listening closely, asking questions, or challenging assumptions, and saw what seemed to be a lightbulb moment, a smile in the darkness, a "wow, I would never thought of that," an understanding, an insight, or just a sense of relief, my energy lifted.



It surprised me because I am an innately an introvert. It surprised me because I did not feel I had any special skill in “people.” But others disagreed, and I already knew that people fascinate me. Why on earth do we do what we do? Why do we choose what we choose, even when we don’t think it is the choice we want? And interacting with others in ways that causes shift, change, or a reconsideration is, quite frankly, thrilling.

I became my own experiment.

Now it is time for you to experiment. How do we start to coach for meaning? What might that mean in a coaching session?

Here are some questions I might ask in a coaching session where the client says they want to discover their meaning:

What does *meaning* mean to you?

When do you have the greatest sense of meaning?

How will life be different if you have a greater sense of meaning?

On a scale of 1–10, how much sense does your life make to you?

What would it take for that score to be one point higher?

What does it mean to you for life to “make sense”?

In what ways does your life make sense to you?

On a scale of 1–10, how motivated are you to get into your day?

What would it take for that score to be one point higher?

What makes you get up in the morning?

What is there in your life that feels like you are making a valuable contribution?

On a scale of 1–10, how strongly do you feel that you have a life worth living?

What would it take to make that score one point higher?

Consider the following exercise. Take a piece of paper and write for 5–10 minutes without worrying about spelling, punctuation, or language. Just write. You are not going to share this with anyone. It is more effective if you write by hand, but if that is not comfortable, you can use a computer. But *write!*

I feel the greatest sense of understanding, purpose, and significance when I



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Put the writing away for a couple of days and then reread what you wrote.

What did you discover that you did not already know?

Who Are You in This Life?

What energizes you?

Are you mindful about who you are each day?

Do you make mindful choices or just go through the motions on auto-pilot?

How do you take stock of who you are versus who you want or expect to be? How do you measure your progress? What is your current goal?

I am not talking about comparing yourself to others—the conversations we have with ourselves about what old friends or enemies are doing now, how “successful” they have been compared to us, and whether we seem to be on track with our one-time peers. I am talking about knowing what *you* mean to be.

A few months ago, one of the people I am privileged to call part of my audience messaged me and asked, “How do I become like you?”

I was startled. No one had ever asked me that before. In fact, despite the many privileges I enjoy, I have often thought that it is good no one else has to be like me! Then, frankly, I became a little dismissive; after all, we cannot be someone else. It is just one of those hypotheticals that does not really get us anywhere. Then I got curious about the question. Who am I? Why do I bother? And then beyond that, what draws me in? What is meaningful to me?

I spend almost every day helping others find out who *they* are, and yet I realized in that moment that I did not really have a clear vision of who I am or who I want to be.

I have always been fascinated by what motivates us. And yet here I was, not really knowing what motivates me. I decided to explore.

Starting at the Beginning

One of the first exercises I did was at a racism awareness training. The task was to write down who I am, measured by roles such as race, gender, home role, nationality, native language, professional role, education, income, family roles, and other personal roles. Then I had to reflect on



the journey I had taken: the people who had influenced me for good and bad, people who had challenged me, and some who had misinformed me, experiences of travel, nature, exhilaration, and despair. I am the sum of all that and more.

There are many potential categories to explore, but in writing this chapter I set a goal of filling a page or so with attributes. It took about 5 minutes. The result follows.

What do you notice? One thing that stands out to me as I look at the list is that I have not identified a profession or job. Curious. Most coaching clients gravitate quickly to what they do for a living as an identifier. What is on your list?

CATEGORY	ROLE/LABEL
Race	White
Appearance	Blue eyes, red hair (natural), moderate build, 5'6"
Gender	Female
Sexual preference	Open
Children	0 biological (by choice); 2 adopted/step
Primary family roles	Wife, stepmother, grandmother
Secondary family roles	Sister, daughter, sister-in-law, daughter-in-law, absent aunt; in early life, cousin, niece, granddaughter
Other roles	Friend, colleague
Primary language	English
Mindset	Curious, challenging, skeptical
Mental health	Lifelong anxiety, occasional depression
Education	Postgraduate
Influencer: mother	White; first-generation college; grew up during World War II, experienced rationing and evacuation; three older siblings; no intention to have children; childcare officer, probation officer, social worker, family therapist
Influencer: father	White; first-generation college; grew up during World War II; one older sibling, who died before my father was born
	No intention to have children; traveler, speaker, industrial scientist

Continues



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(continued)

CATEGORY	ROLE/LABEL
Influencer: paternal grandparents	Irish; many siblings; lived in poverty; grandfather war veteran (WWI)
Influencer: maternal grandmother	Maternal grandfather died in 1944; grandmother married, widowed, never remarried; four children; ran a boarding house; one of three siblings
Influencer: sister	Married, three children; family oriented, driven, and with full career in education in the UK.
Location of upbringing	UK—rural Kent, London, New York
Education	All-girls school in Gravesend, Kent; engineering university in Bath (to study economics!), England; London School of Economics to further study economics
Educational studies	Economics, law, mediation, coaching, positive psychology, project management, finance
Role models	Early life, mainly male: my father, a science teacher, a boss, a professor; later life, increasingly female: actresses, authors, teachers, artists, activists, friends, colleagues, women who overcome, women who shine, my mother, my daughter, my sister
Anti-role models	Bullies, dictators, politicians, women who undermine other women, bosses, teachers
Passions	Nature, reading, learning, movies, believing in others, music, challenging assumptions, stirring the pot
Health	Generally good; used to be very physically active (mini-triathlons, squash, circuit training); now lazy about exercise; love healthy food; strong history of dementia on mother's side causes concern; father's family physically healthy, has some mental health challenges
Socioeconomic status	Middle class
Living situation	Own home, shared with one person
Living conditions	First world; running water, city sewer; high level of general comfort, many conveniences, access to healthy food, clean air, outside spaces



What Does All That Mean?

I am not a religious person, although I do consider myself to be spiritual. I feel strong connections to nature, people, trees, and more. I also have a strong sense that our choices can have big ripple effects. But I don't believe we are meant to follow a preordained path. Our choices are often limited, but we do get to choose—if not what to be, then *how* to be.

As I contemplated the who am I question, I realized that the more urgent question for me is, what am I supposed to do with all that life? How do I combine the various parts of my life to construct a meaningful path forward? What lessons am I going to learn, and how will I apply those learnings? What feels significant, important, purposeful? At the end of my life, what do I want my legacy to be?

In positive psychology one of the exercises we use is to have people imagine that is the end of their life (a little morbid, I know) and they are writing their epitaph. What would you like it to be?

What words do you want on your epitaph?

Here lies Ruth. Throughout her life she looked for the better side of people's nature, their strengths, their skills, and helped them to see and activate their better nature too. She brought out the best in people. She was not perfect—far from it—but she always maintained a sense of meaning and believed life is worth living.

What do you want *your* legacy to be? What do you want said about you? What words do you want people to use about you?

Perhaps one never seems so much at one's ease as when one has to play a part.

—Oscar Wilde

What part do you want to play? You cannot play me, and, honestly, you would probably not want to. But you can become whoever you are meant or want to be. Sometimes it is hard to do. Alone, it is hard enough. How can you develop perspective, challenge your own thinking effectively, consider options you don't know exist? As Socrates famously said, "The more I know, the more I know nothing." The expanse of what we don't know will always be greater than that which we do know.

So, we turn to others to help us, right? Of course. But the problem with others is (a) they are usually trying to find themselves and their





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place in the world and (b) if they care about us, they care about what we choose to do and be because they have a vested interest and generally want to influence us.

Our parents want us to go to college, get a good job, “be happy.” Our life partners want us to want the things they want, to share in the journey, and to care for them. Our boss wants us to want to stay in our job and perform well.

Or maybe we just don’t like to ask for help from anyone, and we struggle on alone.

A frequent challenge is that we make choices when we know the least and the people around us at least think they know more. We choose our school focus before we know what we want to do and be. We choose a life partner before we know who we are. We choose where we live based on where we have already been. We may get where we are meant to be going in the end, but it is a less than efficient journey.

Case Study: Teagan

What about Tegan and her search for inspiration and meaning?

One of the striking aspects of coaching is that we go where the client wants to go. Tegan has already identified areas of exploration: values, character strengths, skills, and motivation. Although many people assume that the coaching relationship is one where the coach leads and the client follows, the opposite is true. The coach uses the breadcrumbs left by the client to help them uncover the path forward.

A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF ASSESSMENTS IN COACHING

Many coaches feel compelled to use assessments to help move the conversation along. And there are some great ones out there, which I will mention as I go along. My caveats though are fourfold:

1. Assessments and their debriefs are not coaching; they are a form of information gathering. Ask your coach questions about the purpose of the assessment and only spend time on assessments that align with the type of information you want to gather in the course of your coaching.
2. In my opinion, assessments should only be used as the relationship develops. Beware of any coach who leaps to an assessment before you have even started the coaching engagement, unless you have signaled that a particular topic—emotional intelligence, for example—is a key focus and agree that measuring your current level is helpful. Assessments are often useful, but they need to



be selected by coach and client together and in the context of what is most useful to you.

3. **In my opinion, assessments should only be considered when you have expressed an interest in knowing more or have asked if there is a useful tool for measurement. The opportunity to use an assessment should be driven by you and your coaching curiosity.**
4. **Very few things can be achieved with an assessment that cannot also be achieved with pure coaching. The primary one is to get a measure of where you are now so that you can measure progress.**

Values

Values might be described as guiding principles; they are the ideas we hold about how life is and should be. They are the principles that are hard to compromise—when we are fully aware of and committed to them.

So how do we discover a client's values? Of course, one way is to use some sort of assessment.

While this can be useful, storytelling with observation can be even more powerful.

Tegan's coach decides to use the storytelling approach and considers a few prompts to get the conversation going:

How much have you already thought about your values, and what have you discovered?

When did you feel the best about yourself during the last week or two?

What did you make sure you did and make sure you didn't do?

Tell me about a time when you felt you were being true to who you are and what is important to you.

What part do you want to play?

Of course, many follow-up questions are possible, depending on where the client goes with this exploration. The main role of the coach is to listen carefully and observe—because this is a chance to hear in the client's story what matters to them most.

The coach goes with the last question: What part do you want to play?

Tegan thinks for a few minutes while her coach sits in silence. Then Tegan responds, "When I was in school, I advocated for changes to some of the school rules that seemed out of date and prejudicial. It was scary to speak up and make waves, but it felt good. I want to be an advocate

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in the workplace. I am not quite sure what this means yet, but I want to make the working experience of my team members positive and safe.”

Character Strengths, Motivation, and Engagement

Business leaders and human resources became more focused on the idea of motivation and engagement when Gallup started publishing their statistics on workplace engagement. We quickly came to realize that most people did not feel connected to their work or inspired to give more than the minimum. Indeed, a significant proportion of the people surveyed were actively disengaged, which can mean that they are spreading negativity. Gallup showed that there is a correlation between how much we use our character strengths and how engaged we feel at work. And managers have a special role in cultivating that engagement.^{10,11}

Over the time I have been coaching, one of the most powerful skills I have learned is to help clients identify their strengths. All too often coaching clients are focused on what they lack, what does not work, and they cannot see the strengths—the positive parts of their personality—with which they are endowed.

A colleague of mine, Dr. Robert Biswas-Diener, describes strengths with a sailboat metaphor. Weaknesses are imperfections in the hull, maybe even leaks. We want to patch the weaknesses to make sure they don’t sink the boat, but they don’t make the boat go faster or more directly to where it is meant to go. Strengths are what fill the sails and drive the boat to its destination.

This is not just an opportunity to give positive feedback to the client or just a way to boost their ego. It is an evidence-based approach that helps us to explore both the best—and possibly the not so great—about the client.

Again, although some great assessment options are available, so much more can be discovered through coaching conversations.¹²

¹⁰ Beck, R. & Harter, J. Managers account for 70% of variance in employee engagement. Gallup.com. Retrieved April 30, 2023, from <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/182792/managers-account-variance-employee-engagement.aspx>

¹¹ Gallup, I. State of the global workplace report. Gallup.com. Retrieved April 30, 2023, from www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace-2022-report.aspx

¹² For example, the VIA Character Strengths assessment from the VIA Institute on Character (Free); Strengths profile from Cappfinity; and the much-used corporate tool, Clifton Strengths from Deloitte. Each measures something slightly different and provides different insights. The VIA is particularly helpful in teams and groups, because the basic assessment is free and there are some great ways to look at the profile of the team as a whole.



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Tegan's coach considers options:

Tell me about what it is like to play the part you described for yourself?

How does it feel?

Who are you with?

Where are you?

What are you using to bring forth the best in yourself?

Tell me about a time when you were at your best.

In the next chapter we will explore what it means to be in our own way.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO PONDER

- What part do you want to play? (What is your *why*?)
- What parts do you *not* want to play? (What is your *why not*?)
- What have you done, been, or said in your life that most inspires you?
- What are you inspired to be?
- What will you learn from those previous inspirations?
- What's next?